

“The death toll is absolutely terrible”: A conversation with sociologist Doris Bühler-Niederberger on the conditions for children in Gaza

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At the beginning of July, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the internationally renowned sociologist and expert in the sociology of childhood, Prof. Dr. Doris Bühler-Niederberger. Since 2019, Bühler-Niederberger has been a senior professor and then emeritus professor of sociology of family, youth and education at the University of Wuppertal in Germany and past president of the Research Committee 53 of the Sociology of Childhood in the International Sociological Association (ISA).

Bühler-Niederberger has repeatedly spoken out courageously about the suffering of the Palestinians and against Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Right-wing media in Germany such as *Bild* and the *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* are therefore waging a vicious smear campaign against her, which is not only based on untruths, but also accuses her of “terrorist propaganda.” In this interview, Bühler-Niederberger talks about the attacks on her, the background of her opposition to Israel’s genocide and the devastating conditions to which children in the Gaza Strip are exposed.

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WSWS: Perhaps to begin you could talk a little bit about yourself and the background of your opposition to the genocide and the associated attacks against you?

Bühler-Niederberger: I was with the Greens and initially thought that Habeck’s speech [which the Green Vice-Chancellor published on X at the end of 2023] was quite bad because it scapegoated immigrants. I found that very bad. I thought the situation was actually one where one ought to fight for unity, express your concern for everyone and not prioritise anyone.

I then thought the reaction was even more problematic, that everyone liked the speech so much. I told the Greens in the chat that I found this very problematic, but the others all thought it was great. I said that it was not good to look for some culprit here in the country now, a group that is already under suspicion anyway. Then I left for this reason, because I encountered very sharp headwinds.

The fact that I became an activist, to a certain extent, is due to my field of research. I’m a childhood researcher. I am not interested in childhood in the sense of how the individual child develops, but what is the social position of children in societies? How are they taken note of? How do they themselves view society, etc.? And then, of course, it’s always about showing that this always appears a little differently.

For example, every conflict has a new connotation when viewed from the point of view of children. What does it mean for the children? And in Gaza, they’re 40 percent or more of the population, and for them, it certainly means something else. That’s what I tried to bring to bear by posting reports. Partly from Save the Children or UNICEF, which have

been around for a long time. The situation of the children has not only been precarious since October 7, but for a very long time.

WSWS: Would you like to say a little more about this, because that is also your research focus? Assessing the situation currently, but also over a longer period of time? How drastic is the situation for the children?

Bühler-Niederberger: There is this very good book [*Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding*] by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian. It’s worth recommending because it simply compiles a lot of what has happened to Palestinian children and how the children were partly targeted in this conflict. They were certainly also involved in their own forms of resistance. Throwing stones at tanks is basically harmless, but has of course led to drastic consequences. That brings them together. You can simply see again that this conflict has another dimension if you look at it from the point of view of what happens to the children.

I have now also started doing interviews with Palestinian people, life story interviews about their childhood and adolescence. Not all of them grew up in Palestine, but some of them also grew up in other countries in the Middle East. But there is always this very, very dark shadow hanging over childhood, which is caused by the situation.

There’s something jarring about this. I have been researching childhood in Asian societies for a long time. For the children, even the worst conditions they may live in, they are normal for them as they know nothing else. “Normal” means to experience that they are second-class human beings, that in some respects they are without rights. This is normal for them at first. And the parents also try a bit, as I have learned, to save the children from realizing this, because of course they are afraid that the children could get into trouble, the whole family could get into trouble.

And at some point in the course of adolescence, this acceptance of the situation as “normal” collapses and sometimes leads to divisions with the fathers, who have deprived them of knowledge. Or who—since they themselves have already experienced this as a child, it carries on over several generations—are partly broken or more insecure.

I just want to communicate that to a wider audience. I actually have a very nice and communicative university management, so I’m lucky. Not everybody has that. However, they take the view that we as scientists should not become activists. But my point of view is that as a childhood researcher, I have to share things like this.

WSWS: Yes, you wrote in a tweet that especially if you are a scientist and also have a certain public standing and a certain privilege to be allowed to think, that you are actually obliged to speak up when such crimes happen.

Bühler-Niederberger: I think so, especially in my situation. I have

taken my scientific career as far as it could go. So I am not at existential risk in this regard.

WSWS: I share that and that has always been the aspiration, especially against the background of German history. It has always been said that when crimes happen, one should not remain silent and let them happen, but stand up against them. You just talked about the situation of the children. Do you have any more concrete information about the situation now in Gaza? The death toll is absolutely terrible and the majority is women and children.

Bühler-Niederberger: The death toll is absolutely terrible. Of course, the number of missing people is also terrible. Kindergartens and schools were destroyed. Not going to school for a year is drastic, especially in this region. All interviews show this, and I know this from research from poor countries. Education is a completely different matter for children in poor countries than for our children, it is very important.

I also do research here in schools. Here, when asked what they go to school for, the children say: to learn to read and write. And if you ask, what do you want to be? I don't know. Maybe a horse farmer because they like to ride. This is not as urgent as asking in poor countries. They have very ambitious plans there.

For example, I have just been to school classes in India, and I have also experienced this in Central Asia and have now noticed it again in the interviews with the Palestinians: education is the opportunity to get out of their situation. Education is the opportunity to achieve something for the family. They don't want to achieve it just for themselves. They have a very strong commitment to the family to achieve something for them. And if you keep this from them now, it has enormous consequences.

When I ask the children in poor countries what they want to be, 80 percent in an elementary school class tell me that they want to become a doctor to help the village, to help the family.

These are beacons of hope. And that's something I've always noticed with the kids. They see themselves as responsible. This is sometimes downright tragic. It can break your heart. In the most difficult situation, they somehow feel obliged to contribute something worthwhile, to somehow take care of the others, to somehow look out for the others. And this discrepancy then between what they want and what they can do. It's distressing to witness this discrepancy.

And these children in Gaza have been experiencing that all along, for a year now. And they also experience that they can no longer make what their contribution was, namely school performance. It will take a long time before schools can function normally again. The predictions of how long it will take to clear the area in order to safely re-enter it are years. So there are not only the mutilated children and the orphaned children and the burnt children and the traumatized children, but there is also this in quotation marks "banal" damage to growing up, which is not banal.

WSWS: All this has an impact on cognitive development, on the whole life of the children—if they survive. But that is questionable given that the genocide is escalating and continuing.

Bühler-Niederberger: Yes, if they survive and are not harmed by malnutrition. By the way, that's another issue. I have already said that sometimes the children are not only collateral damage, which is bad enough, but are also the focus. And if you cause a nutritional deficiency, you are deliberately damaging the children. This may be done unconsciously, but I do not believe that anything that is done about warfare in that region is still happening unconsciously. They have far too much experience with it.

WSWS: There are also the documented statements by leading Israeli military and political figures, in which they declare that these are human animals that must be exterminated.

Bühler-Niederberger: Yes, those are the statements. And even if you only produced malnutrition, you might make the population lose weight, but you do irreparable damage to the children. And all that poor people

have is their children.

WSWS: And all of that motivated you to speak.

Bühler-Niederberger: That not only motivated me, it compelled me. I canceled things I should have done. For example, I should have written an article about child abuse in church institutions. And I said, this is all serious and I have dealt with such things up to now. But that now has to take a backseat. When it comes to children's vulnerability, the situation in Gaza now has priority, and then I have to talk about it.

And I also have to do research on this. I can't do it on site right now. When the situation is safer, I would like to do it on site, because it is always different when the adult reports about it in retrospect than when you talk to the children themselves. And I also think it's something that people should understand with all the hatred they have. This is something impactful for me and I have respect for it. I am not the one who always refers to children's rights in the same way and always acts as an advocate for the children. But there's a point where I have to do that.

The UN's Rights of the Child, as we know them today, were first initiated around 100 years ago, because of the "enemy's children." The woman, an English philanthropist, who raised the issue, Eglantyne Jebb, traveled to the territory of today's former Yugoslavia and saw the miserable conditions of the children, who were the children of those who had been the enemies of England in the war. And that is why she made this proposal for a Convention on the Rights of the Child, at the time with the League of Nations, i.e., because of the enemy's children.

I think this is important. This was not done to protect our children, but to protect all children and especially to protect the enemy's children. And we have to talk about this tradition, I think. Incidentally, Jebb received countless death threats at the time. So I'm still doing fine by comparison. I'm only under fire from the *Jüdische Allgemeine* and the *Bild*. And in a way, I see this as an alternative order of merit for my efforts.

WSWS: Yes, it is. One must not be intimidated by these right-wing media. But what has happened is despicable. For example, we have also written about the eviction of anti-genocide protest camps at Humboldt University and the Free University in Berlin. The police were extremely brutal towards students, and even journalists and lawyers were attacked. But there was also a letter from the professors against police violence, which Michael Barenboim, for example, signed. I'm not sure if you signed it [Prof. Doris Bühler-Niederberger nods]. As a result, there was another smear campaign against those who speak out against police violence to protect their own students. So the campaign is already extremely aggressive, but I think it's so aggressive because of course they know that they actually confront a majority.

Bühler-Niederberger: We are on the side of what all UN resolutions say, including several recently. We are on the side of what UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres says. We are on the side of what the WHO says, we are on the side of what the ICC and ICJ say. We are on the side of the law. And the Basic Law protects the right of students to protest. So they can only fight us aggressively. They can't say, excuse me, we have violated paragraph so and so. They can only say something fundamental like, and someone said this again to me today, you are friends with terrorists.

I am a professor emeritus and yesterday I wrote to all my colleagues because they were urged to sign this newly circulating letter and to stand up for Jewish students. I wanted to draw attention to the fact that it is not entirely unproblematic that the author of this letter has posted the flag of Greater Israel. You have probably noticed that he has also reposted things that question that there is a food crisis in Gaza, and that he also shares posts from right-wing extremists.

I have been insulted, my timeline has been searched. There were untrue claims about some "likes" that I gave, which were no longer visible at the time and which I did not give. So, you are immediately attacked personally, in a tone that is not appropriate at all among colleagues, that is

disrespectful, that is not appropriate at all towards anyone. So that's very aggressive.

WSWS: We now have the situation, just to perhaps mention this here as well, that our youth organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which campaigns at the universities against genocide and police violence, has appeared in the *Verfassungsschutz* (German secret service) Report. Prior to that, its mother party, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), was placed under surveillance. This is how the state reacts. The fact that they now go so far as to monitor and persecute us with the *Verfassungsschutz*, which, as we know, is infiltrated by right-wing extremist forces, is a serious question. But they do this from a position of weakness, because they know the opposition they are facing.

Bühler-Niederberger: And it is also the case that with regard to the professors who signed the letter for the students in Berlin, it was immediately said that they had to be monitored by the *Verfassungsschutz*.

WSWS: And cut funding.

Bühler-Niederberger: Yes, that too. And surveillance by the *Verfassungsschutz*, I think that's outrageous. So you are taking a position that in no way goes beyond what international law says. And my research now, for example, this kind of childhood research, would have been unthinkable before the declaration of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This went hand in hand with this whole perspective that children are members of society who must also be considered and investigated as such.

So I would say that there is no possibility of doing science at all. And I am also a bit angry, I am a foreigner, even for a foreigner it is no longer possible to go along with this. I have been socialized differently.

WSWS: You raised this letter "No room for antisemitism." And you said, you are critical about it. And rightly so. I have seen that, for example, a man like Jörg Baberowski has also signed. Maybe you're familiar with him. This is a right-wing extremist professor at Humboldt University who incites against refugees, who is working very consciously to relativize the crimes of the Nazis. He argues in his writings that the Holocaust was nothing more than shootings by the Red Army in the Russian Civil War. And in 2014, he stated in a *Der Spiegel* interview that Hitler was "not vicious." So you have a situation where people who are obviously right-wing extremists are now putting themselves at the forefront of this so-called campaign against antisemitism, which itself makes clear what the content of it is.

Bühler-Niederberger: Yes, apart from that, as a professor I have an obligation to stand up for all students. I have often observed in seminars that there is actually such a thing as a racist exclusion of students by fellow students. It took me a relatively long time to notice what was actually going on here, and then I also talked to students about it, and some were grateful to me for a long, long time. So we have an obligation to be sensitive to all such things, no matter what it is. But the fact that we are supposed to stand up for Jewish students and colleagues is also a bit presumptuous, because I currently know many Jewish colleagues who advocate a completely different position than this letter advocates.

WSWS: And there are many Jewish students, especially in the US, who are part of the protest movement against the genocide.

Bühler-Niederberger: I am sure that the proportion of Jewish participants in these protests is much higher than in the general population.

WSWS: In reality, it is antisemitic to associate the entire Jewish population with this crime, with this genocide by the Israeli government. Many Jewish people are very shocked that this is happening again, precisely because of their own history, and are developing a strong position to counteract this.

Bühler-Niederberger: I don't mean to say that everyone who signed this letter – which is why I wrote the email to my colleagues to warn

them—is going along with this right-wing line. Maybe some are. Some might want to show how loyal they are to the state, sometimes there are unpleasant reasons in the background for that. But there are certainly also those who actually just thought: that's right, antisemitism is a danger. And it will actually be a huge danger once this is over. I look forward to that with horror.



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