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CONGRESS BLOG

THE HILL'S FORUM FOR LAWMAKERS AND POLICY PROFESSIONALS

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March 25, 2014, 11:00 am

No more backsliding

By [Dara Richardson-Heron](#) and [Wade Henderson](#)

 43  29   17 

COMMENTS 1

We have had several thought-provoking conversations recently about a new and surprising description of women's status in America. According to the latest Shriver Report, *A Woman's Nation Pushes Back from the Brink*, a study by journalist Maria Shriver and the Washington think tank Center for American Progress, American women are at risk of "backsliding" from their achievements in rights and opportunities over the past half-century.

The reason, the report says, is that policymakers have ignored a "seismic shift" in American family life: Three-quarters of all moms are in the U.S. labor force, which is now half women – and half of them are their families' primary breadwinners. This is especially true for women of color. Yet like women around the world, U.S. women still aren't equal in the workplace.

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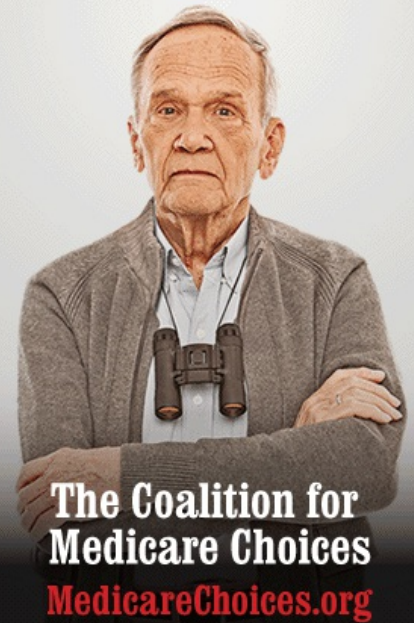
Women earn less than men doing the same work, and mothers earn much less. Mothers face so much wage and hiring discrimination that many hide their children's photos, while proud new dads often get raises. It's no accident that fewer than 5 percent of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women.

The Shriver study features a bipartisan poll showing that a majority of Americans, especially African-American and Latina women, support new steps by employers and governments to adapt to this new family and workplace reality. They want government to address our society as it is now, rather than trying to return to an outdated model of stay-at-home moms in two-parent households. The good news is that we already know just what tools will do the job.

These tools are spelled out in the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a landmark international agreement that affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women around the world. It outlines a comprehensive framework that can guide governments toward eliminating discrimination and bring any country closer to achieving gender equality.

American women enjoy opportunities and status not available to most of the world's women, but few would dispute that more progress is needed, as the Shriver report points out. Closing the pay gap and ending domestic violence and workplace discrimination should be priorities. We could start by providing paid family and sick leave. That alone would go a long way to stop the "backsliding" that American women are experiencing now.

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CEDAW imposes no changes in laws or policies on its own. Instead, it outlines a universal standard that every civilized nation should want to meet. Countries prepare a report for the CEDAW Committee on women's situation every four years. The Committee then makes non-binding recommendations on ways to improve, often drawing on practices that have been successful in other countries. Policymakers and activists often cite those recommendations in seeking new approaches to advancing women's status.

Last year, for example, the CEDAW Committee deplored women's dire situation in Afghanistan and spotlighted continued threats to Pakistani education activist Malala Youfsani. CEDAW earlier called on Kuwait to grant women the right to vote, and it inspired programs to educate people about women's rights in Brazil and Cameroon. Referencing CEDAW framework and norms, Mexico and Ghana have passed their own laws to reduce violence against women. The government of the Netherlands referred to CEDAW to address sex trafficking and support trafficking victims; Japan relied on CEDAW's approaches to reduce workplace discrimination and sexual harassment.

CEDAW ratification would put the United States in the company of 187 other signatory countries in assessing our remaining challenges and measuring our progress. It would strengthen the U.S. global voice in calling on other countries to respect women's rights. It could also help structure a national dialogue between U.S. civil society and government on ways to address the gaps in women's full equality that persist here today. And its comprehensive approach could help us all focus on what American women need right now to stop "backsliding."

The Shriver report is subtitled, "A woman's nation pushes back from the brink." We have in fact seen a seismic shift in women's status over the past few years, a reverberation from the enormous progress over the past fifty. Let's take the next steps now to make progress once again, not only for women but for their families and our entire nation.

Richardson-Heron is the chief executive officer of YWCA-USA and Henderson is president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

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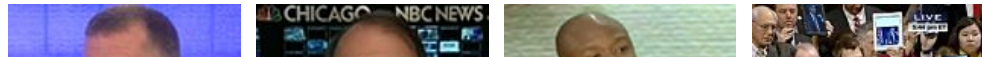
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