

## UN Assessment of Women in the US President's Message

Every day, especially after reading the newspaper or watching the news, I think about how fortunate we are to live here in this bountiful and peaceful land. But paradise has its shortcomings as an article in *The Huffington Post* by Laura Bassett exposed.

The United Nations, in an attempt to evaluate and report on discrimination against women around the world, sent a delegation of three women to the U.S. They are part of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The three women, Eleonora Zielinska, a professor from the Warsaw University Law School who specializes in penal and medical law, Aldo Facio, a Costa Rican lawyer, scholar and writer who has long advocated for women, and Frances Raday, honorary professor at University College, London and professor emerita of Elias Lieberman Chair in Labor Law of Hebrew University of Jerusalem (among other academic positions) visited three states: Alabama, Texas and Oregon. They "evaluated a wide range of U.S. policies and attitudes, as well as school, health and prison systems." (Huffington Post) The U.S. was found wanting in several notable areas, three of which are mentioned below.

**The Salary Gender Gap**—Women do not earn as much as men in virtually every country in the world. Women fare best in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark (in that order) in earnings but even in those countries, women earn 80-84 percent of what men earn. By comparison, women in the U.S. are paid, on an average, about 75 percent depending on race and ethnicity. (Global Gender Gap Report, 2014)

**Paid Maternity Leave**—The U.S. is the only developed country that does not provide paid maternity leave. It ranks with Papua New Guinea in that regard! Even the majority of developing countries provide paid maternity leave. This leave is covered by Social Security alone or a combination of Social Security and Employer Liability and may pay a pregnant woman from 70 -100 percent of her salary in developed countries and 50 – 100 percent in developing countries. Albania provides 52 weeks of paid maternity leave at 80% for 21 weeks and 50% for the remainder. The length of maternity leave varies as well, from 4 weeks in Tunisia at 67.7% of salary to 62 weeks at 100% in Estonia. (International Labor Organization Reports) Studies have shown that paid maternity leave has been linked with lower infant mortality rates and improved mother-child bonding. Zielinska, Facio and Raday found that most women in the U.S. were not aware that most other countries provided paid maternity leave!

**Affordable Child Care**—My limited research indicates that Child Care is quite inadequate worldwide with few exceptions. Europe does a better job than the U.S. We are, according to The Center for American Progress, "a preschool caboose." Why are we not making more efforts to increase preschool subsidies rather than reduce them? Tennessee began a preschool program for 4 year olds which resulted in: a 176% increase in picture vocabulary, a 75% increase in letter-word identification, a 152% increase in oral comprehension and a 63% increase in quantitative concepts. Children's school readiness is dramatically increased by attending preschool and so is the probability of continued success throughout the educational process.

The Nordic countries and France are often held up as models for preschool education. Here is a description of what Sweden provides, "In our system, municipalities are obliged to provide preschool for children from the age of 1, not only when parents are working or studying, but also when they are unemployed or on a leave of absence. In the latter cases, children are entitled to at least 3 hours per day or 15 hours every week. In addition to this, all children receive at least 525 hours per year free of charge,

beginning from the fall when the child reaches the age of 3.” (Miriam Nordfors, New York Times) In Sweden, the sliding scale never exceeds \$196 per month, and is determined by the parents’ incomes and the number of children in the family.

In France, virtually 100% of 3 and 4 year olds attend the *Ecoles Maternelles*. Most of these are public and free (6% are private). Two year olds are allowed but there is not room for all of them; the government guarantees a place for all children from 3 years on. The classes are smaller in areas designated as lower income to give the children more specialized attention.

In the U.S., subsidized or free daycare would be so helpful to parents working in lower paying jobs. In N.C., the maximum income eligibility limits for subsidized childcare services changed April 1, 2015, to allow fewer people to qualify in an attempt to cut the budget. Childcare, even for those who earn a comfortable living, is extremely expensive. For many of our low income families, their choices are few: a willing grandparent or relative, flex schedules and leaving the child with a partner, or providing childcare to others in one’s home. We can and should do better. A society that values its young values its future.

I hope all of you will come to hear what our three AAUW fellows have to say on February 20<sup>th</sup> at the Chapel Hill Public Library. Donna Wilson has written an excellent article describing who they are and their areas of interest. One has received a Community Action Grant—the first such speaker in recent history for our branch. Stay warm and take care!