

Women caught in the crosshairs of global debate over families

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By **Hannah Elliott**

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WARSAW (ABP)—Critics of the [World Congress on Families](#) called it homophobic and unrealistic. Supporters saluted the recent congress—the fourth such global gathering, which played to a sympathetic audience in conservative Poland—for proclaiming the family unit as the only hope for economic and spiritual growth in Europe.

In each case, women are caught in the crosshairs of the debate—portrayed either as saviors of civilization or victims of conservative dogma.

“It’s been said, ‘When you educate a man, you educate a man. When you educate a woman, you educate the whole family,’” Bush administration official Ellen Sauerbrey told listeners during her May 11 address. “Educating women and girls raises every index of development” in a nation.

Sauerbrey, assistant secretary of state for the [U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration](#), talked about the toll of human trafficking, much of which directly involves women and children. Educating, supporting and enabling women will, by extension, protect their children and make a

dramatic dent in the 800,000 people coerced or sold into exploitation each year.

Sauerbrey's speech characterized much of the rhetoric of the three-day event, held in Poland's tallest building, the Soviet-era Palace of Culture and Science. Billed as the largest event ever of its kind, the congress attracted more than 3,000 activists, policymakers, theologians, lawyers and teachers—most committed to a traditional view of family gender roles.

Speakers said large families led by heterosexual parents and bound by faith are the solution to the "demographic winter" facing Poland and the rest of Europe. And mothers figure significantly in that equation, they stressed.

Jurgen Liminski, a German journalist specializing in social and family policy, cited reports that said the estimated cost of paying someone to do the daily tasks of a housewife is \$9,000 euros a month—more than \$12,000 in American currency.

But that work never is compensated, he said. Work perceived as important to society is respected, but work not believed to contribute to society lacks respect, Liminski added.

"Economies from the very beginning did not recognize the work of the family. It is never paid," Liminski said. "This discrimination negates the identity of mothers and their roles—the mothers who create the basis and the identification of a nation."

Christine Vollmer, president of the [Latin American Alliance for the Family](#), also noted the need to support women through economic means. She urged countries in the developing world to convince the European Union to stop "imposing on our countries anti-family values, neutering women. ... We must succeed in convincing our government to cease imposing tax structures that penalize our women."

A similar refrain, one also appealing to so-called liberal diplomats allegedly imposing their values in Europe, came from Austin Ruse, president of the [Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute](#), and Patrick Fagen, a clinical psychologist and former deputy assistant secretary of health and human services for the Bush administration.

In his May 12 address, Fagen said a child is best protected in a home with both a mother and a father. Violence against children is most rare in married relationships, while it's highest in cohabitating relationships between two never-married people, he said.

"Feminists of Europe take note: The safest place for children is in the natural family. The most dangerous is cohabitating couples," he said.

And Inese Sesere, a Latvian parliamentarian, decried gender-based policies that "try very hard to pull mothers out of the role of mother and put them into job markets."

Some family experts say such pronouncements are overly simplistic, however.

Asked to comment on the congress, Diana Garland, dean of [Baylor University's School of Social Work](#) in Waco, called for some balance to the view that women who join the workforce have made a mistake.

A newfound potential for economic independence has led to a lower percentage of the population being married, Garland conceded, but it has also produced other changes. For instance, the entry of women into the workforce and their ability to control family size have increased their potential for economic independence. Women now have the option to leave abusive marriages—or not get married at all, she said.

"In that sense, family planning and women's rights have decreased the prevalence of nuclear ... families," Garland said, but other important

factors, like lengthening lifespans, also contribute significantly to the growing single-adult populations.

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President [Paige Patterson](#), two-time president of the Southern Baptist Convention, told the Poland gathering that men who must “cede leadership to women” for lack of male leaders in corporate life and women who “leave the family for the workforce” will be unexpected manifestations of “the advance of feminism and the marginalization of men.”

“Mom and hot apple pie have been replaced by institutional daycare centers and cold apple turnovers,” he said.

With or without apple pie, the bottom line for many experts on both sides of the debate is that families should receive assistance, not resistance, from governments, since many modern societies in effect require both parents to work outside the home.

That in itself is inherently expensive, demanding and stressful, Garland said.

“Our research shows that that the biggest stress in the lives of all families—married, re-married and single—is the presence of dependent children,” she said. “Policies that will help parents provide the emotional and economic support for their children will undoubtedly encourage more adults to be parents.”

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