MS. BRAZILE: This week on To the Contrary with Bonnie Erbe, first, women’s groups enter the debt reduction debate. Then, a controversial idea to remove severely obese children from their parents’ custody. Behind the headlines, women in Asian countries going to great lengths to have sons

(Musical break.)

MS. BRAZILE: Hello, I’m Donna Brazile, sitting in for Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to To the Contrary, a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, the debt ceiling debate and its impact on women.

As negotiations continue over the nation’s $14 trillion debt, women’s rights organizations are calling for an agreement that doesn’t sacrifice programs that disproportionately serve women. The National Council of Women’s Organizations, comprised of 240 groups representing more than 12 million women, launched a nationwide campaign this week: Respect, Protect, Reject. Respect women’s contributions to the economy and need for economic security. Protect Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and programs that serve and employ women. And reject budget plans that threaten to send women, particularly older women into poverty. According to data from the Institute for Woman’s Policy Research, more than half of women 75 and older would be living below the poverty line without Social Security, and 56 percent of women are Medicare recipients.

Terry, are women voices being heard in this debate?

MS. O’NEILL: Well, not nearly enough. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has been involved in the most recent part of the negotiations, but before that, Vice President Joe Biden’s negotiating group did not include women, and the Gang of Six in the Senate did not include women. We don’t think nearly enough women’s voices have been heard.

MS. WHITE: Unfortunately probably not enough women, but the thing is this has become more of a sword fight than a real debate.

MS. WILLIAMS: You know what, not only are there not enough women present in the room, what we’re seeing is that the interests of women, not just older, but also younger, and in particular low income, are being thrown under the bus.

MS. WRIGHT: Women overwhelmingly handle their families’ budgets, and they recognize that government spending is out of control. We’ll know if women’s voices had been heard if in the final analysis, there are cuts in government spending, there is caps on future spending, and their permanent limits on the budget structure for the future.
MS. BRAZILE: But is there a way to structure this recovery so that it will benefit women and not hurt women and their families?

MS. O’NEILL: Yes, absolutely. You need a – we need a robust jobs program. Women have been left behind in the current recovery. Women have net-net, since the recovery started, lost over 200,000 jobs. And that’s continuing because women are so overrepresented in state and county government jobs, like teaching and nursing, and childcare workers, and home health care workers.

So what we need is a jobs program to put the teachers back to work.

MS. WILLIAMS: It’s also about education. I would throw that out there, too. This isn’t just about jobs once folks are ready to get them, but it’s also about education, how are we preparing young women and young people in general. And part of that is protecting the Pell Grant program and programs that help make it possible for lower income and middle income young people to go to college in the first place.

MS. WHITE: Well, it’s also about restructuring some entitlement programs. We really need to make hard decisions – men, women, children – about how are we going to provide for the neediest going forward. The fact that they can’t come to any kind of conclusions about what things look like is very – is just disturbing, and I think most Americans are sort of – I don’t understand. There’s a deal that can’t be made, but no one’s willing to make it. And there are mostly men in that room, and I have no doubt that if there were more women in that room, there would have been a deal made.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, the government massive debt limits women’s choices and the overregulation limits women’s choices, so there does need to be structural changes that will free up women so that they can be making their own choices, what they want to do with their lives, rather than instituting more government programs that end up restricting women.

MS. BRAZILE: But so many women are beneficiaries of these entitlement programs. How will that impact women?

MS. O’NEILL: Look, women rely on Medicare more so than men. They rely on Medicaid more so than men. And by the way, a lot of people don’t know, 70 percent of Medicaid dollars go for nursing homes and for families with severe disabilities like a child with autism. So if you shut down the nursing homes, which will happen if we have these cuts that have been proposed to Medicaid, 80 percent of the residents of nursing homes are women. And the vast majority of people who work in these nursing homes are women. So Medicaid cuts is going to disproportionately affect women. Social Security cuts, that shouldn’t even be on the table because Social Security has nothing to do with the federal budget.

So in the short run, we have jobs crisis, sure we have a budget deficit long run problem, but right now we have a jobs crisis. We got to attend to that.
MS. WHITE: No doubt we have a jobs crisis. I mean, if you create more jobs, you create more revenue, but it is the same. I can’t believe that they cannot come to deals about benefits for three-year-old, people – children who are three-year-olds now, girls who are three-year-old. There has to be some sort of happy medium, where we get our fiscal house in order and women have to get their fiscal house in order. Just – it’s across the board. As Americans, we have to be more responsible. We have to be more realistic. I am okay with making a deal now for something that’s going to happen 30 years from now. Up it to 67, tell me now, don’t – they keep pushing the ball down the court, and they need to make a decision because we have to live within our means.

MS. WILLIAMS: Well, part of that deal that you’re willing to make – I think most of us here are willing to make a deal, there’s folks on Capitol Hill that aren’t – but part of that has to involve ending tax cuts to the rich, and that what no one wants to talk about. We want to talk about ending federal programs. We want to talk about entitlement programs and subsidies. We don’t want to talk about the big areas of the federal budget that actually can stand some significant cuts that are protecting the interests of those who need to be least protected in the society. What do we say to that?

MS. WRIGHT: Social Security is broke because the social security system is broken. And if you ask anyone under 40, I’d say even under 50 years old now, they’re not depending on Social Security for their retirement. They’re already making their own plans. So let’s go ahead and address now these structural problems because frankly, the public is already aware that they can’t rely on Social Security, fix the structural programs now, and give us the freedom so we can be making our own choices.

MS. O’NEILL: I just really can’t let that go by. The viewers of this program really need to know Social Security is not broke. It in fact is currently running a $2.3 trillion surplus. This was created in 1980 because people actually knew that there was a baby boom generation that was going to retire. So in fact, we have a multi-trillion dollar surplus in Social Security, and that system is solvent today for the next 20-some odd years. And if you simply scrap the cap, a lot of people also don’t know that payroll taxes are – the amount of your wages that are subject to the payroll tax are kept at $106,000. So the wealthiest, the highest income earners are not paying their fair share into the Social Security program. If you scrap the cap, the Social Security system will be solvent for the next 75 years and more. So what’s – clearly you need to make some changing, like scrapping the cap, but to say that it’s broke is absolutely –

MS. BRAZILE: A yes or no answer in this final round. Will the lawmakers sign an agreement before the August 2nd deadline, yes or no?

MS. WHITE: Yes.

MS. WRIGHT: I hope so.

MS. O’NEILL: Yes.
MS. WILLIAMS: Yes.

MS. O’NEILL: I hope so as well. From the battle over the debt to possible child custody battle.

Childhood obesity affects more than 12 million children across United States and one doctor is encouraging the state to intervene. He suggests parents with obese children should have the child removed from the home and placed in foster care. Obesity specialist, Dr. David Ludwig, published his opinion in the “Journal of American Medical Association” this week. Ludwig claims the parent is not to blame for the child’s obesity, but rather government intervention can support the whole family. Critics say obesity is not a big enough risk to remove a child from his or her home. Childhood obesity has been linked to breathing problems, diabetes, and heart disease. Seven states already have laws that allow the removal of a child due to over nourishment or severe obesity.

Wendy, is this an acceptable role for government?

MS. WRIGHT: Yes, there’s a tendency when we see a problem to look at it in isolation and then come up with unreasonable solutions like putting a tax on food. That would penalize everyone. Instead, we need to look at the whole problem. And it’s not only overeating. It’s things like watching TV, video games. And studies show, when you watch TV, whether it’s a child or an adult, you’re more likely to eat more. So I think we need to deal with this as a holistic problem and not think that the government’s the solution.

MS. WILLIAMS: You know what, I agree that we need to deal with it as a holistic problem, but that assessment missed a couple of really important parts of the problem, which would be the fact that this is going to disproportionately impact lower income families and communities, who don’t have adequate access to fresh vegetables, healthy food, medical care. So the challenge that I have with this while in the short term, it seems like, oh, it’s a logical solution: remove children from the homes, give them the nutrition they need, and send them back. Who does it disproportionately impact and what larger problems is it tackling?

MS. WHITE: Well—go ahead.

MS. O’NEILL: You know, one of the mothers that was interviewed about this, she holds down two jobs, and so it’s very—just to keep paying her rent and put some kind of food on the table, and yes, she’s tired and she does bring home fast food for her children to it, that is a big part of the problem. Over the past 30 years, we’ve seen wages fall for ordinary people, particularly for working class people and lower income people. So what you’ve got is neighborhoods that are not safe, so exercise is a real problem, and then neighborhoods where you don’t have fresh vegetables.
MS. BRAZILE: But let’s talk about Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign. That’s a campaign that’s designed to prevent childhood obesity. What do you think about that program?

MS. WHITE: It’s a great thing and actually changing the dialogue, because people talk about this in isolation. I could just take the child out of home. We can’t even afford to take children out of homes, where they are being abused, let alone children who are overeating. So government can’t do everything. This is part of the problem that we have universally. We can’t do everything. There has to be a conversation because most kids who are obese, they also have obese parents. This is a holistic family situation. People have to change their behaviors. Michelle Obama’s initiative has got a conversation going. It doesn’t take a lot of money just to go outside, to walk around a block. It doesn’t require a government program to say, turn off television and go play in the yard. We can do that.

MS. BRAZILE: With over 30 percent of the children population in this country obese, how do we really solve this problem without involving the parents?

MS. O’NEILL: Well, I think you can involve the parents and I think government has a role to play. Look at the anti-smoking effort. That was driven by nonprofit organizations, by parent and teacher organizations, by – and by the government. And in fact, it has succeeded in bringing rates of smoking down. We can do the same thing with nutrition. In fact, a lot of obese children are malnourished, are very malnourished. So they’re not getting good nutrition. They’re just getting empty calories. And you can have government programs that can work alongside of the parents and in the neighborhoods and with the nonprofit organizations to help address the problem holistically like Wendy says.

MS. BRAZILE: Wendy, what do you think, you think we can get parents more engaged in this conversation so that they understand what’s best for their children?

MS. WRIGHT: I think we should and frankly, our societies turn to experts. We always turn to experts and have made parents feel as if they are not capable of raising their own children. So let’s first empower parents by letting them know, look, you can do this, and not say, okay, we’re going to take the children away from you and get them to so-called experts. And frankly, how many success stories do we hear of kids being put in foster care?

MS. BRAZILE: Yes, well, Erica, that is a big problem. Can government take on one more obligation, where of course, there’s no money to pay for the programs?

MS. WILLIAMS: I agree with what Terry said. Government has a role, but what I love about this conversation is that it’s not either-or, right? This is not a government problem. This is not solely a family problem. It’s a societal problem. And so there is a role for every part of society to play in protecting our children and in helping them thrive.
MS. WHITE: Absolutely, but I do think like America has not come up with a solution to displace parents. And the biggest influence on a child is their parent. A kid cannot go to McDonald’s and buy stuff without a parent. You cannot get there without a parent. So parents have to take control. And like you said, education, society can help to educate parents to do better, but that is ultimately a decision in a household.

MS. BRAZILE: You know, Terry, the Federal Trade Commission released guidelines to help advertisers market healthier options to children and their parents. I mean could this lessen, you know, childhood obesity in the future?

MS. O’NEILL: Sure, there’re two things that could be done through that kind of regulation. One is to encourage companies to provide healthier foods in neighborhoods where the foods are needed. The other thing is the growing use of nutritional information on those – on the menus, particularly of the fast food restaurants. I think they’re very useful for moms, particularly busy single moms who really are trying to do the right thing, don’t necessarily have the information, but let’s also think a little bit about livable wage jobs, so that a mom doesn’t have to work 15 hours a day at two jobs just to pay rent and keep food on the table.

MS. BRAZILE: Well, any other great ideas that we can pass along to those out there who might be thinking about how to, you know, help their children live more healthier?

MS. WHITE: It’s all about turning off the television. It’s all about – when you go to McDonald’s and your kid is upset that they’re not getting a McFlurry, you say you get the oatmeal, you say you get the Fruit Yoghurt Parfait. I have to say. I got to McDonald’s a lot, but I get those things. You have to choose. And we can’t regulate. We can’t legislate people’s choices. People are going to make good choices and they’re going to make bad choices. But that’s what it is. I mean McDonald’s is going to market to kids. It’s what they do. It’s you responsibility to say, you’re not getting a Quarter Pounder today. That’s it.

MS. WILLIAMS: I agree that people have choices, but I think there is legislation involved and there is regulation involved in making sure that people’s choices are not determined by their income, their socioeconomic status, where they live.

MS. WRIGHT: Well, legislation or regulation, people will always find a way around it. When you tell someone they can’t do it, that rebellious spirit comes down in them. So the legislation-regulation is just going to encourage people to find ways around it.

MS. BRAZILE: You know what would be helpful is we make healthy cooking really fun because as a child going up in New Orleans, everything we ate – and it was healthy – it was fun to make jambalaya. It was great fun to make etouffee. We made it out of healthy ingredients.
MS. O’NEILL: Right, absolutely, ingredients that were not highly refined, just ordinary ingredients. I think where the regulation can be most useful is in informing parents. And believe me, you need strong regulations to force corporations, particularly the large corporations like the fast food companies, to actually give information to parents that parents can use in order to make those choices.

MS. WHITE: Absolutely, but I got to say, I don’t know that anyone ever things that French fries are a good thing, like there’s no way that you think that. I mean, I understand that you need to educate people and inform people of nutritional value, but when you walk into Mickey D’s, I’m not doing it to get something healthy.

MS. BRAZILE: Well, we’re all loving this. (Laughter.) All right. Behind the headlines, unnatural selection. In parts of China, India, and other Asian, and Eastern European countries, women are disappearing. The sex ratio at birth is as high as 163 boys for every 100 girls in some places. To the Contrary spoke with journalist Mara Hvistendahl about this phenomenon and the consequences of choosing boys over girls.

(Begin video segment.)

MS. MARA HVISTENDAHL: I was working as a journalist in China and I was interested in the fact that the women kept disappearing essentially as the country was developing. In provinces in Eastern China, you go to a school, and you see many more boys than girls. Back in the 1960s, population control was the issue that everybody really cared about, so population control organizations have done studies in Asia, showing that one of the reasons that couples continue to have children was that they wanted at least one boy. And one of the solutions that was proposed at the time was guaranteeing couples a son.

MS. BRAZILE: Hvistendahl visited nine countries and interviewed countless people affected by gender selection. She found parents are overwhelmingly choosing boys over girls, and as technology advances, it is easier and easier to intervene with nature and have the child you want.

MS. HVISTENDAHL: New technology comes in. This comes to economic development, so ultrasound. Abortion is pretty pervasive and often relied upon as a birth control method. Abortion’s legal in these countries. What is illegal is sex determination. So you’re not allowed to know the sex of your baby. But the law’s not enforced very well, so it’s easy to bribe technicians. It’s easy to find out.

MS. BRAZILE: According to demographic researchers, the sex ratio at birth is naturally 105 for every 100 girls. In China, it is 118 for every 100 girls. And in India, it’s 112 boys for every 100 girls. And in the port city of Lianyungang, China, the sex ratio is 163 boys for every 100 girls. With fewer and fewer girls, men are facing a life without marriage.
MS. HVISTENDAHL: Men are going to great lengths to find wives. They’re buying them. Women are being trafficked from poor places to richer countries. And all of these secondary human rights abuses are happening as a result of the imbalance. We’ll see tens of millions of men who will not be able to find wives if they want them.

MS. BRAZILE: Women are at a premium in Asian countries. And even though they have more opportunities than ever before, many are being pressured to get married and have children.

MS. HVISTENDAHL: For some women in – the women who are born into cities, into areas with high sex ratios, they may have an advantage, when it comes time to marry. They may be able to demand more from their husband, demand a better husband, in a way. But for the vast majority of women, this is going to be a setback.

I think there will be much more pressure on women to get married, to take on domestic roles, just by the sheer fact that there are fewer of them.

(End Video Segment.)

MS. BRAZILE: Erica – Erica, why do you think they desire a son over a daughter?

MS. WILLIAMS: You know, I don’t know. There’s probably a level of gender discrimination. Women are economically undervalued. It is hard being a girl in certain cultures and climates. And so I think that contributes to it. And then there is the question of what is the long-term impact of there being these so-called disappearing or missing women. And I think we heard it in the segment, there will be definitely and certainly an impact.

MS. WHITE: I lived and studied in China. And it’s a major national security problem for the Chinese government because 18 to one ratios, and then in the hinterlands of China – I mean that is driving the sex trade out of North Korea, the trafficking women out of North Korea. And the problem is, is what do you do with that many men with nothing to do, no jobs, no opportunities, no wives? That’s a major internal problem for them because that breeds unrest. And you see in the western provinces. China doesn’t have a huge murder rate, but it’s soaring in some of the western provinces.

MS. WHITE: I think this is a serious problem when there’ve been too many choices. This started off as population control. It was the elites and societal western elites who went into these areas and promoted this program of limiting the number of children that Chinese and other countries could have. But then, they switched the PR marketing to it’s a woman’s right to decide. Well, when the women had that, they chose then to have boys instead of girls. And the ultimate problem is seeing children as something to satisfy yourself, rather than human beings who have value and dignity in and of themselves, welcoming and embracing every child because they are human beings.
MS. BRAZILE: Well, Terry, is this an abortion issue?

MS. O'NEILL: No, I don’t think it should be. I think what’s really fascinating about Mara Hvistendahl’s book is that she points out that population experts decided that the way they were going to fix the problem was to focus on the behavior of women and control the behavior of women and sort of drive women, as if they were little incubating little machines. And now, the proposed – in some – the anti-abortion movement, the ideological anti-abortion movement in this country is using this disappearance of girls and women to justify, again, controlling women, and disrespecting them.

Wendy, I think what you said actually is something that I agree with. Why don’t we begin with fundamental respect for women?

MS. WRIGHT: For all people, boys and girls. We don’t want the pendulum swing the other way and women start aborting boys just because their boys.

MS. O'NEILL: Well, what I’m talking about is the women that really exist right now – if we just look at the lives in being, and respect the women for all of the decisions that they need to make throughout all of their lives. It’s not just about, you know, what’s in her uterus at a particular time. It’s what is in her community. What is her future? What kind of future horizon does she have for herself and can the men that she loves in her life, in her family, what they can help imagine for her future?

If we started thinking in terms of women as really, fully human, just like men, I think we would have a very different system.

MS. BRAZILE: But you know, Dana, societies with fewer women are often more violent. Should this concern us as well?

MS. WHITE: Absolutely. It should definitely concern you about China. It should definitely concern you about Asia because that is a – that is a major pressure. Their one child policy has skewed their demographics. And on top of it, the preference for boys has skewed it. And it’s – I hate to say it, but idle hands are the devil’s workshop. You have a lot of men who have no impetus to be better, i.e., if I had a good job, I could get a wife, I could support a family. If he doesn’t have that impetus, what does he have to do? He hangs out with a bunch of other guys, with nothing to do. There is nothing good that can come of that.

MS. WILLIAMS: And that’s not just conjecture. I mean history shows us that, right, from imperialism, European imperialism in the 1500, there was a male youth bulge. In the Cold War, if you look at the countries that actually had the most intense and violent civil uprisings, there was a male youth bulge. So we kind of see this trend in history. So we’re not just making assumptions about testosterone. This is actual fact and reality.
MS. WRIGHT: And as Ronald Reagan said, women helped civilize men. (Laughter.) And as men have a family, they have a future, something to look forward to, and a reason to sacrifice, and to be kind and gentle and peaceful toward others.

MS. BRAZILE: Well, let’s try to close on a very hopeful optimistic note. Should the United States get involved in these issues involving human trafficking, of course, forced prostitution, and bride buying?

MS. WRIGHT: Well, the United States already is involved. We passed a very strong law about 11 years ago. It gets renewed every so often – that Trafficking in Persons Act. And that – the United States is using our influence in other countries to try and reduce the trafficking problem.

MS. O’NEILL: We need to be involved because the United States is one of the largest consumers of trafficked women and trafficked girls and boys for labor.

MS. BRAZILE: Dana, your thoughts.

MS. WHITE: Absolutely United States has to be involved. And we have our own problem with trafficking into Alaska, where you have very few women in that. You have a lot of trafficking going back. We have to be involved as a super power, as the American people, to represent all life.

MS. WILLIAMS: I agree 100 percent. This is not simply a women’s issue. This is a human issue. Women are humans, and this is an issue that impacts us nationally, internationally, and we absolutely have a role to play.

MS. BRAZILE: Well, thank you. That’s it for this edition of *To the Contrary*. Next week former Xerox CEO Anne Mulcahy. Check out our website for “TTC extra” and hear the panelists discuss women soccer. Whether your views are in agreement or to the contrary, please join us next time.

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