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Opportunity to Protect our Children

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Guest commentary

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We're getting into the thick of the 2008 election campaign, yet conspicuously missing from the debate are some of the most basic issues for our future — issues that powerfully affect our families and our lives.

According to the 2007 CIA World Factbook report, our wealthy nation ranked 42nd in that most basic measure of quality of life, child mortality. Another 2007 study showed that we lag behind other industrialized nations in surveys of math and reading. Another showed that our maternal mortality rates are higher than those of other rich nations — and even those of some poorer ones.

Most Americans recognize that the real wealth of our nation lies in our children. Yet our great country has fallen way behind in child mortality, child poverty and educational scores. This is a betrayal of our basic principles of equality and opportunity. It's also economically suicidal, because for the new "knowledge economy," the most important capital is "high quality human capital."

Countries that invest in high quality child care, universal health care, stipends for families caring for children, and other caring policies consistently rank highest in international comparisons of quality of life. Their citizens are less stressed, their children's education is assured, crime rates are low and life spans are high.

But wouldn't these more caring economic policies mean "socialist mollycoddling" and lower productivity, as we're so often told? Hardly. They would be the soundest economic investment we can make. As demonstrated by Nordic countries such as Finland, Sweden and Norway, nations that enact caring policies actually score very high in the World Economic Forum's famous global economic competitiveness ratings.

So here's one basic question to ask candidates: What do you propose to do so our nation adequately invests in our children and in the high quality human capital needed to be competitive in the new knowledge-based economy?

Then there's the conversation about poverty. It's amazing that when politicians and the media talk about this problem, they still ignore that worldwide, the mass of the poor and the poorest of the poor are women and children. U.S. government statistics show that women over 65 are twice as likely to be poor as men over 65. When we take into account women's lower work hours and their years with zero earnings due to family care, U.S. women workers make only 38 percent of what men earn over their lifetime — an earning gap much larger than the 23 percent commonly reported.

So here's another question for candidates: Do you support policies like those in other industrialized nations that give visibility and value to caregiving, such as refundable caregiver tax credits, social security credits for child care and paid parental leave?

Here's another question to change the political conversation to focus attention on women and children: The United States is one of only a handful of countries that has not ratified the women's human rights treaty known as CEDAW and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Do you support U.S. ratification of these treaties, and what would you do to ensure ratification?

Violence against women and children is the most prevalent human rights violation globally — and this violence teaches children it's OK, even moral, to use force to impose one's will. So here's another question: What will you do to address violence against women and children nationally and internationally to help build "cultures of peace," particularly where there's a resurgence of fundamentalist religious vigilantes?

This election year offers an exciting opportunity to make visible issues that lie behind many seemingly intractable problems. For real change that moves us to a more equitable and peaceful era, we've got to ask new questions. That's something every one of us can do.

Carmel resident Riane Eisler is best known for her books "The Chalice and The Blade" and the recent "The Real Wealth of Nations." She is president of the Center for Partnership Studies and co-founder of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence. For more information, see www.rianeeisler.com.