

Proverbially we value them. Monetarily? No [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

THE N&O: Americans seem to place little value on the work of stay-at-home moms. Why?

THEODORE N. GREENSTEIN: In our proverbs and folk wisdom, we value stay-at-home moms very highly. Think of Mother's Day and the sayings about "the hand that rocks the cradle" and so on. But in economic value, we don't place much on that role. One reason is in the entire capitalist system -- it was beneficial from employers' viewpoints that male workers had stay-at-home wives because the workers could benefit from the services that they could provide. If they had to find somebody else to provide those services, they'd have to pay them and would demand higher wages.

Nobody was seriously concerned about placing an economic value on housewives and mothers until a series of divorce cases in the 1960s or '70s where wives were suing for settlements and lawyers decided to try to quantify the economic value a wife contributed to a marriage. Of course, that's very difficult to do. I remember an article by Ann Crittenden in the 1970s where she basically tried to come up with a dollar value. The problem is that assumes all the services homemakers provide would have corresponding values in the marketplace. Are you talking about gourmet cooking or fast food? Are you talking about maintaining a wonderfully clean home or minimal standards of cleanliness? Are you talking about wonderful cognitive or emotional support for children or just making sure that they are healthy?

Gary Becker, who won the Nobel prize in 1992 for his work on the economics of the family, argued in *Business Week* in 1995 that our calculations of gross domestic product were grossly understated because we don't take into account this invisible housework and care work that goes on. He recognized that virtually everything in the household could be purchased in the marketplace. You can clean or pay somebody to clean. You can watch your own children or get day care. In economic terms, the question is: Is the substitution perfect? Can somebody else care for your children in a day-care center as well as you can at home? That has social and psychological implications.

It's interesting that when we talk about middle-class moms, we encourage them to stay home with their children, but when we're talking about working-class mothers, and especially single mothers, our policies require them to work. So if you're looking for an interesting contrast about how we value motherhood and this caregiving work, on the one hand for middle-class families, the ideal is that Dad has a full-time job and Mom stays home caring for the kids. That's certainly not a realizable goal for the working class, even if there are two parents, and certainly not for single mothers.

Another indication of how little we value care work is Social Security. Who gets Social Security? People who have paid jobs, but people who did the same kind of work at home without a salary don't get benefits. That's an interesting statement about whether we do or do not value that kind of work.

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