

What's a Mother's Worth?

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This Mother's Day let's give mothers what they really need: a more secure old age. If you're a woman, or a man who cares about his mother, sister, or daughter, there's something you need to know. In the United States women over the age of 65 are twice as poor as men in the same age group.

There's a reason poverty so disproportionately hits women. Most of these elderly poor women were, or still are, caregivers -- and according to most economists, the people who do the caring work in households, whether female or male, are "economically inactive." Of course, anyone who has a mother knows that most caregivers work from dawn to dusk. And we also know that without their work of caring for children, the sick, the elderly, and maintaining a clean home environment there would be no workforce, no economy, nothing. Yet current economic indicators and policies fail to include this work as "productive work."

The good news is that we can change this bizarre way of looking at what is, and is not, productive work. In fact change is already in the works. A 2004 Swiss government survey placed the value of the unpaid work in households at 70 percent of the reported Swiss GDP. And according to salary.com, a U.S. organization, the caring work of a mother is worth over \$100,000 per year.

Recognizing the value of caring and caregiving is the first step. The next step is changing business practices and government policies to recognize and reward this work.

Of course, some people will argue this work should not be sullied by crass material considerations -- that it should be done solely out of love. Certainly love plays a major factor in these activities. And so it should. But this does not change the fact that society derives enormous benefits from these activities, so much so that it could not function at all without them. Nor does it change the fact that the people who primarily perform these activities -- women -- have been condemned to be the mass of the world's poor.

Certainly we don't want wages for caring paid by the person -- usually a man -- where there are two parents. But we don't have to continue to penalize those who do the caring work for families, as we do today, by denying them benefits in their own right. Again, there is movement in this direction. When the new President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet was inaugurated, one of her first steps was a subsidy to poor women who are caregivers.

We too can -- and must -- give more visibility and value to caring work in families. There are many ways to do this -- from social investment in good training for caregivers, caregiver tax credits, and social security for caregivers. Moreover, through flex-time, child care stipends, universal healthcare, paid parental leave, and other family-friendly

workplace policies supported by governments and employers, both women and men can balance work inside and outside the home. This will give more men the opportunity to be closer to their children and give more women the opportunity to express and develop other aspects of their human potential, and at the same time also derive income from employment.

The devaluation of women and the "women's work" of caregiving is a pathology we must leave behind -- not only for the sake of the female half of humanity but for us all. Indeed, only as we give real value and visibility to the work of caring and caregiving can we move forward to economic systems that truly care for the real wealth of nations: people and our natural environment.

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