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Mothers Day and soup kitchens

WAGNER COLLEGE NEWS SERVICE

“When I think of Mothers Day, I think of soup kitchens,” said Jean Halley, a sociology professor at Wagner College, when we talked to her recently about Mothers Day. Professor Halley has devoted much of her career to the study of mothers’ lives.

“Before I became a college professor, I was part of a group that ran a soup kitchen in Boston,” Halley said. “On Thanksgiving and Christmas, we’d be overrun with folks who’d come to help feed the destitute. But we never saw those folks the other 363 days of the year.

“Mothers Day is kind of like that. For one day of the year, we make a show of honoring mothers. But the fact is that, in our society, mothers work longer and harder for less pay than anyone else.”

A few years ago Jean Halley published a study of parenting called “Boundaries of Touch” that highlighted some of the inequities faced by mothers in America:

Mothers do the lion’s share of child care. One study Halley cited said that only 1.5 percent of children under 5 have fathers as their primary guardian.

Women with children form the largest proportion of the homeless population.

Roughly half of all women with children work full-time at a paying job, and these mothers work harder than almost anyone else in our economy — more than 80 hours a week, counting child care along with their outside employment.

A U.N. study cited by Halley says that working mothers spend about a third of their total working time on paid work and two-thirds on work that is unpaid and unrecognized. For men, the U.N. study said, those proportions are reversed.

Even in modern, “gender neutral” relationships, when children enter the picture, the roles of the partners tend to become more stereotypically masculine and feminine, and the mother tends to assume most of the responsibilities associated with child-rearing.

And then, there’s the “mommy tax.” If a college-educated woman has one child, she will lose about \$1 million in lifetime earnings, roughly speaking.

“Mothers Day is fine — flowers and cards for Mom, taking her out to Sunday brunch, all of that,” Halley said. “But one day of praise and thanks and flowers and relief from cooking doesn’t make things right — it’s just a conscience-salving holiday visit to a soup kitchen. We can do better than that.”

Wagner College is a U.S. News & World Report Top 25 regional university on Staten Island in New York City.

SIDEBAR — Mothers Day in America: A short history

Mothers Day in the United States was first championed by Julia Ward Howe. Best known today as the author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Howe campaigned after the Civil War to unite mothers to prevent future wars; her 1870 Mothers Day Proclamation was a call issued *to* mothers, not a petition promulgated *for* them.

Howe’s proclamation was revived several decades later in West Virginia as the inspiration for Mothers Friendship Day, which sought to re-unite families and neighbors that had been divided between the Union and Confederate sides of the Civil War. It was Anna M. Jarvis, the daughter of the Mothers Friendship Day organizer, who in 1914 persuaded President Wilson to sign a congressional resolution designating the second Sunday in May as Mothers Day.