

Hannah Roman  
Acting Assistant Professor of Lawyering  
New York University School of Law  
245 Sullivan Street, Room C-30  
New York, NY 10012  
Tel: (212) 998-6331  
Email: hannah.roman@nyu.edu

### Foster Parenting as Work

In recent years, feminist scholars have built a rich body of literature on care work. Building on that literature, the paper contends that foster parenting should be recognized as a form of care work, and suggests that failure to see it as such reflects both the devaluation of reproductive labor and the flawed notion that genuine care can exist only outside the market. Like other care workers, most foster parents are women—disproportionately women of color—and like other care workers, they are poorly paid. Indeed, although foster parenting is hard work and takes significant skill, it is rarely considered “work.” Payments to foster parents, as defined by federal law, explicitly exclude compensation for the foster parent’s labor, despite the fact that many foster parents rely on the payments as a source of income (as opposed to merely reimbursement for the costs of providing care). In the popular media, and at times in the legal literature as well, foster parents who do so are demonized, accused of “doing it for the money.” Foster parents, who are disproportionately poor or working class, are expected to serve as altruistic volunteers, motivated only by their love for children. In the foster care context, the boundary between the purportedly hostile worlds of economic transactions and intimate relationships continues to be carefully policed, in rhetoric if not in reality.

The paper first explores the nature of the work and this country’s long history of placing economic value on foster children before turning to the ways in which modern foster care policy reflects pervasive anxieties about commodification. I address a number of additional arguments against paying foster parents before suggesting that considering foster parenting as work entails far more than merely paying foster parents for their labor. I argue that unwillingness to consider foster parenting a form of work has stood in the way of explicit, careful consideration of the qualifications and training needed to be a good foster parent and the standards to which the work should be held, as well as the proper means by which the work should be rewarded. Once considered substitute caretakers whose role was limited to daily care and supervision of children whose parents were given little support or opportunity to regain custody, in many jurisdictions foster parents are now expected to participate actively in reunification efforts as part of a professional team. I question whether our insistence that foster parents should be well-meaning volunteers, rather than trained and skilled workers, actually serves children’s interests, given the significant needs of many foster children and their parents and the extent to which foster parents are expected to devote themselves to meeting those needs. Thinking about foster parenting as work thus permits exploration of the tension between developing notions of foster parenting as a semi-professional role and the actual treatment of foster parents in today’s child welfare system.

Please note: I am submitting this abstract solely for presentation at the conference and not for publication in the symposium volume of the University of Baltimore Law Review. Thank you for your consideration.