EGGIE R. SMITH, the newly appointed Charles F. Nagel Professor of Employment & Labor Law, made an impassioned call for greater regulation of domestic work worldwide during her installation address on “Regulating Care Work.”

“In a world where work is supposed to be the ‘golden ticket’ to various protections and benefits that will promote our economic and social well-being as well as our health and safety, domestic workers are cast aside, rendered invisible, and denied the workplace rights that so many take for granted,” Smith said.

AS MANY AS 100 MILLION people around the world are domestic workers, a group that federal law in the United States defines to include home care workers who provide in-home care for elderly and/or disabled individuals. However, that number is declining while the number of people needing care is growing, Smith said. Low pay, no overtime pay, long hours, and a lack of benefits like health care will add to the challenge of meeting future home care needs.

“For some time now we have dealt with this problem by intensifying efforts to offload home care onto the weary shoulders of low-paid workers, especially immigrant workers,” she continued. “This safety valve of low-wage labor has allowed us to postpone the impending care crisis and has stifled serious contemplation of how we should equitably regulate and organize the provision of care.”

Part of the problem is that society has “failed to conceptualize domestic work as a legitimate occupation,” Smith said. Compared to most workers, who leave their private homes each morning to enter the public world of work, domestic workers labor in isolation within the homes of private families, where regulators have traditionally hesitated to intervene. Smith added:

“The law has yet to envision domestic workers as workers who have needs apart from those of the families for whom they labor.”
—Peggie R. Smith

Syverud, the Ethan A.H. Shepley Distinguished University Professor, stressed Smith’s many contributions as a dedicated teacher and scholar. In praising Smith’s multidimensional research, Syverud said: “Peggie’s groundbreaking scholarship expands the frame with which we look at work and workers. It imagines how we might use law to address not just traditional occupations and definitions of work, but also the reality of work as it is experienced by everybody, including those who work in the home.”

The Nagel professorship was established through the estate of Daniel Noyes Kirby, who received his bachelor’s degree in 1886 and his law degree in 1888, both from Washington University. He was a member of the Washington University Corporation (the predecessor to the Board of Trustees), lecturier in the Law Department (the predecessor to the law school), and a prominent St. Louis attorney.