



Childcare workers demonstration Dublin 5 February 2020

Capitalism: a system stacked against women

Alex Day and *Marnie Holborow* explain how women's secondary status arises from the way capitalism works. They show Marxism has some useful tools for explaining the role that women play for the system, but also for explaining how commodification negatively affects all aspects of life, including how sex is sold in capitalism. They argue that huge mobilisations across the world in which women are playing a major role, show another world for women is possible.

In Dublin, in early February, more than 20,000 parents and childcare workers protested against the lack of government support and unfair wages. The march was overwhelmingly female and, like many others across the world in recent times, living evidence of how capitalism continues to weigh heavily on women.

In America, fifty years on from when the women's movement forced society to recognize all rape as a crime, incidences of sexual assault and rape are now so common in society that people speak of a rape culture. It has taken a long, drawn-out and courageous campaign by women raped and assaulted by film mogul Harvey Weinstein to bring that that vicious, serial sexual predator to justice. The *me too* campaign was forced to take the form of speaking out precisely because the women knew they were up against an overwhelmingly sexist power structure which forced others into silent collusion because that was 'the way things were'.

Ireland, in 2018, we saw a huge step forward for women's rights when we won abortion rights through the Repeal of the Eighth Amendment. But as we look across the capitalist world, the upholding of women's rights is not a given; in some instances, it has been seriously undermined by right wing governments. Trump has normalized sexism, sexual misconduct and assault in a way not imagined possible even five years ago. The racist Lega party which was in government in Italy wants a return to traditional family values with women's primary role mothers of the 'Italian nation'. The far -right Vox party in Spain has attacked what it calls 'feminazis' and calls for the repeal the gender violence law and of the legal protections for the LGBT+ community. The Polish ruling right wing Law and Justice Party attempted – but failed – to introduce a bill which would force women give birth regardless of their situation, because they should 'obey their biological duty'. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's attack on the left has included targeting women's rights and freedoms. The anti-woman agenda which has surfaced in our current world of political crises is a stark reminder that there is no automatic protection in capitalism for women's rights.

Zero equality

It is also true that despite the official narrative in capitalism that women have arrived, the last decade has

seen gender equality in terms of the material conditions of women stagnate.

Women globally still earn 23% less than men. In the US, young women are worse off than their mothers' generation, in terms of economic equality, health, and overall wellbeing. Poverty among women, particularly those without college degrees, is on the rise and female incarceration and suicide rates are up.¹

During the recession and its aftermath, women in the EU have fared badly. The formal gender pay gap across EU countries remains stuck at 16.3%, unchanged for a decade. In Ireland, at 13.9% it is slightly lower. But the overall gender earnings gap – which takes account of lifelong lower hourly earnings, fewer working hours in paid jobs, and interrupted employment – averages a woeful 36.8% lower than men in Ireland, a figure much the same across the EU.² This is discrimination on a big scale and an outrage.

It is not just about paid work. Poverty rates for Ireland's lone parents – 90% of which are women, for whom paid work is an impossibility because childcare is so expensive – have more than doubled in just five years. Women make up 42% of homeless people in Ireland, double the EU average. At the end of 2019, Focus Ireland reported that the 140 children they were supporting in Dublin were homeless when they were born.³ The increase of gender-based poverty is a direct result of austerity policies which have cut back social entitlements and services, on which women disproportionately depend.⁴

Obviously, material deprivation does not affect all women. It is also worth mentioning that inequality *between* women has widened. One UK study, last year, found that the life expectancy of women in the poorest parts of England has fallen by three months, while that of women in the wealthiest areas rose by almost as much.⁵ Ireland's wealthy women can expect to live four and half years longer than its poorest.⁶ The unprecedented concentration of wealth at the top of society, also includes a tiny layer of very wealthy women. Ireland's billionaire rich list has Hillary Weston of Penny's and Brown Thomas at number one.⁷ When Sheryl Sandburg, whose net worth is some \$ 1.8 billion, visits the Facebook HQ in Grand Canal Dock and talks to adoring Government ministers about 'leaning in' to address the gender imbalance, the media does not

mention that her choices are off the scale compared to ordinary women.

Marxism, care and capitalism

As the system is seen as not delivering for women, so has there been renewed interest in Marxist explanations of women's oppression. For example, a recent special issue of the US journal *Monthly Review* on 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', and different contributions make the case that it is capitalism at the root of women's oppression.⁸ The issue reprints an article by Margaret Benston, a Canadian scientist and Marxist

of the late 1960's, who theorized women's work in the household as an integral part of capitalist production and class relations. More generally, the Marxist term social reproduction, has begun to be used again with its proponents returning to Marxist-based writings such as those of Lise Vogel, which was written in the 1970's, to develop further a Marxist analysis of domestic work in capitalism. This return to Marx to explain women's oppression, even if some interpretations leave some questions unanswered, is to be very much welcomed, in that it makes the case for radical and anti-capitalist solutions.

First, to explain social reproduction. It refers to the means by which capitalism is assured a continuous supply of workers. The care that (mainly) women provide for children together with general work done in the home to feed clothe and refresh workers for the next day, produce use values for the reproduction of labour power – Marx's term for the capacity to work. It is the system's reliance on unpaid labour in the home which lies at the root of women's oppression. Even in an era when many more women are in paid work, this dependence continues as many states' refuse to fully

fund childcare and other care services. In other words, individual households play a very important role for capitalism: they provide a constant supply of fed, cared-for, ready-to-work workers, as well as reproducing and rearing the next generation of workers, at very little cost to the system. Marx succinctly summed up the benefits of this arrangement 'it is the production of a force [i.e. labour power] which produces wealth for other people'⁹

Social reproduction, as it is argued today, extends in many directions, and can often seem quite abstract and academic. But as Tithi Bhattacharya makes clear, it situates itself within a revolutionary Marxist tradition.¹⁰ In locating social reproduction as part of the class dynamic of capitalism, it rejects the dual system analysis, a theory held by earlier socialist feminists. This located women's oppression in both capitalism *and* patriarchy, with patriarchy being understood as an ideological or male-driven power found across different types of societies and operating, with various degrees of independence, from economic systems. Social Reproduction Theory marks a break with this dual systems approach, in favour of a unitary classical Marxist explanation for women's oppression.¹¹

While social reproduction theorists are often based in the academy, they have also strongly identified with the current wave of women's mobilisations, particularly in the US. For example, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser have co-written *A Manifesto for a Feminism of the 99%* which places the struggles of working-class women at the centre of their demands. It criticizes liberal feminism for having become an alibi for neoliberal global capitalism, arguing that their concerns and interests are pitched against working class women and women of colour. Their Manifesto seeks to become voice of radical activism, although whether it will itself become a rallying call remains to be seen.¹²

In the present climate, when austerity policies have continued to run down funding for community supports and services, the concept of social reproduction is acutely relevant. Nancy Fraser has spoken of a generalized 'crisis of care' in neoliberal capitalism. Certainly, in Ireland, where there has never really been a fully publicly funded welfare state, that crisis is all the more acute. Ireland's hopelessly inadequate childcare system – expensive, deregulated and almost exclusively privatized – has sparked off a growing campaign, as men-



tioned above, for state funding and support. But that is only a small part of the problem. Individuals – mainly women – are left to pick up the care tab that the state will not, and this includes care of people who are too old or unable to work. It has been reckoned that women in Ireland put in 38 million hours of unpaid care work every week, adding at least €24 billion of value to the Irish economy every year. This is equivalent to 12.3 % of the Irish economy.¹³ Quite a saving for the system by anybody's reckoning. This glaring fact while many working-class households continue to shoulder the burden, is bound to give rise to more struggles around these issues in the future.

Marx and gender

It is often claimed that Marx and Engels had scant regard for questions of gender oppression, even that they were steeped in the bourgeois morality of their day. A closer reading of what they wrote challenges this view. For example, in *The German Ideology*, they stress the stultifying environment of the bourgeois family model, which because of its acceptance of the low status of women, they saw as containing the 'latent slavery' of capitalist social relations.¹⁴ Heather Brown, in an informative study of Marx in relation gender and the family, shows that Marx saw the oppression of women as a stain on all society; Marx's concerns, contrary to common belief, go well beyond economic questions.¹⁵ Marx understood that the home could be a very alienating place, for middle class women as well. For example, examining the police records about a spate of female suicides in Paris in the 1840's, he sought to understand the reasons behind one woman's suicide, who happened to be wife of a respectable property-owning man. Marx links the way she was treated by her husband to the general conditions of French society at that time. He also makes a passionate plea against the capitalist state and its endorsement of the enslavement of women:

The unfortunate wife was sentenced to the most intolerable slavery, and this slavery was only enforced [...] on the basis of the *Code civil* and the right of property, on the basis of social conditions which render love independent of the free sentiments of the lovers and allow the jealous husband to surround his wife with locks as the miser does his coffers; for she is only a part of his inventory.¹⁶

This is not an isolated text. In *the Holy Family*, Marx rails against the bourgeois morality of the day which fails to see the material pressures which lead women into prostitution. In a discussion of a popular novel of the time, Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, he defends the character of the prostitute, Fleur de Marie, for showing strength and humanity in the 'inhuman situation that society has forced upon her. 'She is a girl who can vindicate her rights and put up a fight'.¹⁷ She is capable of forging her own humanity despite the 'chains of bourgeois life'; she is not a powerless victim as framed by philanthropic institutions of the day, but a person with agency.¹⁸

Marx is at pains to show that there are mental and personal consequences for everyone in a society run for profit. Alienation affects all human relationships in capitalism, including intimate ones between people of all classes. In 1844, Marx wrote that private property has made us 'stupid and one-sided' and makes us think that 'an object is only ours when we have it'. Everything was subordinated, in capitalist society, to 'a sense of having' including our relationships with people.¹⁹ This is even more relevant today, as in late capitalism, objectification and commodification has spread into every area of life.

Commodification

Women are increasingly made to feel alienated from their bodies, and capitalism has created a highly profitable market to maintain and benefit from this alienation. Both the beauty and diet industries have recorded profits in the billions. The range of available cosmetic surgeries has expanded in recent years, dissecting and compartmentalising women's bodies into parts, all of which can be made the subject of scrutiny and improvement. Incredibly, earlobe reduction surgery is one such procedure, which takes a part of the body that most likely nobody paid attention to previously and turns it into a source of shame and anxiety. Though the concept of a 'youthful ear' is ridiculous, it nonetheless commands a price-tag which can range from \$500 to \$900.

'Sexual empowerment' under capitalism is also often conflated with fitting into a stereotype about how a 'liberated' woman should look or behave. The image sold to us by corporations like Victoria's Secret (which until very recently relied on convict labour to produce their lingerie) is one of youthfulness, thinness, whiteness,

and availability. This sanitised form of sexuality has been used to sell everything, from perfume to cars to cosmetics. Empowerment is thus framed as something which can be achieved by plucking, painting, squeezing and, most importantly, buying the right things. Rarely is sexual empowerment associated with personal pleasure or the right to say no, as well as yes. This is not to argue for a return to the puritanical attitudes of the past, but to reframe the conversation around what is meant by sexual liberation.

Nor is it a question of demonising women who have cosmetic surgery or enjoy cosmetics. It is about challenging the uncritical assumption that “free choice” under capitalism is inherently liberating. This attitude has framed the choice to have cosmetic surgery or wear cosmetics as an act of empowerment and emancipation when it is simply creating demand and enshrining the choice to buy more things. When stripped of any political meaning, this type of feminism can become a profitable accessory. Celebrities are praised for wearing a ‘This is what a feminist looks like’ shirt which was produced in a sweatshop. Liberal feminism, it should be added, too often adopts the same language of empowerment and liberation, as if everything is only a question of making choices, apparently oblivious to the fact that real choice requires the material means to exercise it. Of course, this kind of individual choice promotion fits well with a market view of society.

In capitalism, a person’s time, and effectively their life, can be bought and sold according to market forces over which they have no control. As we have seen, Marx argued that such a society alienates people from their natural capacities and influences their experience of the world, and this includes sexuality. Capitalism has made sex a commodity which can be bought and sold and abstracted from human relationships and connections.

Because of the lack of evidence-based sexual education in schools, many young people learn about sexual relations through pornography. When that’s all a young person may have for reference, it is easy to see how such dynamics can be replicated. Mainstream porn sites are dominated by categories where women are subjugated by authority figures, are presented as underage, or are coerced into saying yes. Pornography desensitizes young men to abusive behavior. Some have suggested as much in relation to the dreadful murder of young schoolgirl

Ana Kriégel in May 2018 in Lucan near Dublin.²⁰ She was violently attacked and sexually assaulted by two thirteen-year-old boys one of whom had thousands of images of pornography on his phone. Whether the link can be proven or not, it is true to say that violent sexual practices become normalised by pornography. It presents situations which are not predicated by a consenting agreement and seldom feature any emotional connection between actors. As such, we are often presented with unhealthy, sometimes violent, detached and alienated depictions of sex.

Sex work

Marx’s sympathetic portrayal of the prostitute is apt, for sex work has massively expanded in capitalism today. Sex workers are often forced into unsafe conditions and, despite the massive demand, end up socially marginalized. In Ireland, where the ‘consumer’ of sex work is criminalized, sex workers are prevented from working together, as it is considered ‘operating a brothel’. Recently, there have been several cases where sex workers, many of whom have uncertain migration status, have been evicted under this charge into dangerous precarity. It is obvious that forcing sex workers to work in isolation is opening the door to further coercion and violence.

Heavy handed legislation is not an answer. Indeed, in countries which have introduced the ‘Nordic’ model, aimed at punishing the buyer of sex, it has resulted in an increase in violence against sex workers. Reducing all sex work to ‘violence against women’ or seeking to ban it outright fails to offer a political analysis of the problems facing sex workers. The problem isn’t with sex work itself or with individual consumers of sex work. We need to acknowledge those individuals engage in sex work first and foremost as workers, through economic compulsion. This means ensuring their right to safe working conditions, their right to unionise, and all other rights that have been secured by the working class. Just because socialists envision a society in which sex work will not have to exist, that does not mean to say that we don’t recognize that sex workers have as much of a place in the fight against capitalism as any other worker. Unless they are included, we cannot speak of true liberation or emancipation.

Mass movements against rape

As Marx stressed, it is not only working- class women



'A rapist in your path' chant by Chilean feminist collective, Las Tesis, Nov. 2019

who are oppressed, something that social reproduction analyses, which see women's oppression entirely in terms of the working class, do not sufficiently address. All women suffer sexism and nowhere is this clearer than in rape which affects all women. The #me-too campaign has shown how many professional and wealthier women have also suffered from the hyper sexism of capitalism.

Gender-based violence is a complex and sensitive issue which can leave lasting psychological and physical scars on its victims. In many cases, it can prove fatal. However, it cannot be understood or challenged without relating it to other forms of violence in capitalist society. To reduce it to the binary of woman as victim and man as aggressor offers no analysis or means of effective resistance. Understanding how gender-based violence relates to other forms of violence, which can also be experienced by men and nonbinary people, demonstrates how this question is relevant to everyone. 'Lean in' feminism offers little here. Far more effective in challenging the rape culture, has been the outpouring of anger and its channeling into action and huge movements on the streets.

2019 was a year of massive political upheaval and revolution across the globe, a trend which has continued into 2020. From Puerto Rico to Sudan to Hong Kong, the world witnessed movements in which women have played a leading role. Across the board, the demands for improved social care and an end to oppression were heard. In Chile, the feminist collective Las Tesis wrote and choreographed an anthem against gender-based violence which resonated internationally. In the face of savage state repression and tanks on the streets, thousands of women gathered to perform the routine. The song dealt with the issues of court prejudice towards rape victims, the state's toleration of femicide and police brutality. The title of the song, 'A rapist in your path' referenced 'A friend in your path', the official slogan of the Chilean Carabineros police in the 1980s and 90s. Sexual violence has been a tactic of the police used against political dissidents since the 1970s. This performance demonstrated the creativity and vibrancy of the revolutionary movements in 2019. The performers related these issues to the broader struggle of over a million people calling for social and political change in the country, which included several major strikes. For in-

stance, Barbara Astudillo, a protester in Santiago, spoke of how the song was locally interpreted to include water rights in the Petorca region, where crucial aquifers are being exploited by the state to produce more profitable crops. The Chilean women's challenge to state violence was taken up by protesters in over 200 locations globally. 'A rapist in your path' has been performed in Mexico, Colombia, France, Spain and beyond. In Turkey, where instances of recorded domestic homicide have doubled since 2012 although largely ignored by the state, performances of the song were broken up by police. This resulted in more demonstrations against gender-based violence being organised across the country.

"And the fault wasn't mine, not where I was, not how I dressed". This line from 'A rapist in your path' has relevance in the wake of several high-profile legal cases in which sexism, victim-blaming and a broken court system denied rape victims justice. In Cyprus, a 19-year-old woman was found guilty of 'public mischief' for daring to report a rape and asking police to investigate it. This already disturbing case of a violent rape is made all the worse by the police's actions. From the outset, the woman was interrogated for hours without a lawyer present. The fact that the woman had consensual sex with one of the perpetrators the previous night was used to portray her as 'asking for it' and a 'whore'. Here we can see how the victim-blaming condemned in the Chilean anthem is experienced by victims of rape globally.

In Ireland too, the Belfast rape trial of 2018 demonstrated the sexism embedded into the court system, as well as its biases towards the wealthy. Overwhelming physical evidence and witness testimony were ignored in favour of preserving the profiles of rugby players, Paddy Jackson and Stuart Olding. The degrading and misogynistic messages shared by the defendants were portrayed by the media as 'boys being boys' and similar victim-blaming attitudes were given an undue amount of air-time. The victim followed the rules of the system; she immediately informed others of the assault, she was examined by a doctor, and she reported the rape to the police. Despite this, the perpetrators were acquitted.

Thousands came out to say that #WeStillBelieveHer. Ulster Rugby were forced to terminate the contracts of Jackson and Olding under pressure from their sponsors, Bank of Ireland, who sensed the public mood. The

Belfast rape trial highlighted the sexist bias of the courts and how if you have money the justice system listens.

Other institutions also perpetuate gender-based violence. The network of migrant women in Ireland, Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDwa) has noted that the alienating conditions within Direct Provision centres have contributed to increasing women's structural vulnerability to sexual harassment and assault, and especially to intimate partner violence.²¹ Both men and women are stripped of their basic human rights and autonomy by the appalling material conditions, restrictive labour laws and meagre allowance afforded by the state. The forced isolation of asylum seekers and refugees in the direct provision system contributes to situations where victims can become trapped in abusive situations. This abuse is also seen most keenly in the invasive questioning and appeals system, which has been described by the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI) as "adversarial at its core" and which, like the court system, can retraumatise victims of abuse.²² The Direct Provision system highlights how gender-based violence can be sheltered by a deeply racist state. Unless we understand the interconnected nature of these issues and deal with them beyond an individual level, we cannot effectively fight back.

Finally, trans people, particularly trans women of colour, experience some of the highest levels of violence. Trans women are some of the most marginalised in our society. Trans women face the double burden of sexism and transphobia. Many feel pressured to adhere to heteronormative stereotypes to pass and, in many cases, to survive. A National Centre for Transgender Equality survey in 2015 found that one in ten had been physically attacked, and half had been sexually assaulted. Trans people face disproportionate rates of homelessness, particularly youth homelessness, unemployment and suicide. Trans sex workers face devastating amounts of violence, and the criminalisation of sex work leaves them even more vulnerable. According to the Trans Murder Monitoring Project, in 2019, sex workers accounted for over half of all murdered trans people that year. The police are often a source of violence in this case, with victims being ignored or defamed after their death. Society's shameful widespread transphobia must be fought against and is a crucial part of the struggle for women's liberation.

Political consciousness

The global outpouring of anger against institutional sexism has coincided with the ever-growing number of women working. Engels, based in Manchester in the 1840's, when women were beginning to work in factories in huge numbers, grasped the transformative potential of women's entrance *en masse* into paid work. 'The first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry,' he wrote. He argued that this would also weaken the traditional nuclear family.²³ He and Marx were too hasty in this prediction, but they were right to see the potential of paid labour for women to have an impact on their political consciousness. Working women's participation in political organizations was prioritized later by socialist women such as Eleanor Marx, Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin. Its relevance has resurfaced today.²⁴

In Ireland, we are living through a social earthquake as regards women working. More than 77% of women participated in the workforce in 2018. This is up from 72% in the decade since 2009, but hugely up from before the Celtic Tiger. In 1971 the participation rate of women aged 25 to 64 was just 20 per cent.²⁵

This has transformed young women's consciousness, as the recent Repeal victory showed. Equally, the struggles of teachers and nurses for the right to pay parity and professional recognition start from the fact that women now expect to work for most of their lives. Although wages may be low and contracts short term or part time, having a job and very often having attended college (which women do in higher numbers than men) open up new freedoms and ways of thinking, which are different to their mothers before them. This social transformation has also, no doubt, played its part in the decline in the influence of the Catholic Church and in the fall-off in support for mainstream conservative parties. It has provided the material and political basis for new movements and specific struggles.

Women out front

There are concrete demands we can fight for that will tackle the issues raised in this article. Free, state-provided childcare is a key demand in this respect because without it, as we have argued, capitalism gets care for free and places a double burden on women. Today win-

ning full access to state-provided childcare, as a social right like schools, we can break down the current discrimination that individualized and privatized childcare creates for women. It could have huge social knock on effects allowing parents to have more time for themselves to do as they please and take some of the stress out of parenthood in capitalism.

Equally, the struggle for reproductive rights continues. Free contraception must also be made available for everyone. Abortion legislation must also be expanded to remove the three-day wait period and the twelve-week limit. Rape crisis centres and women's shelters must be publicly funded.

All these issues come up against the limits of capitalism. In today's uncertain world, with another recession constantly looming, no state is prepared to invest the amount of public money in such basic services.

Already we have seen that struggles for women's rights and freedoms often overlap with broader anti-capitalist struggles. This has been most apparent in Chile, but also in Lebanon women were on the front lines of the anti-government demonstrations. Within the Hong Kong protest movement, women have brought forward their own demands and demanded a stop to the sexist treatment of women at the hands of the police.

Many of these demands were raised by revolutionary movements at the beginning of the 1900s and again in the 1960s. Capitalist exploitation has prevented their enactment. What is striking with the wave of struggles today is that women are so noticeably to the fore. It is not coincidental that the most serious crisis confronting us all – climate change – has been called out and articulated uncompromisingly by a young woman still at school.

Ninety years ago, the Russian revolutionary Trotsky, observing that it was women textiles workers in Petrograd who first took to the streets in February 1917, noted that it was often the most oppressed section of the working class who take the initiative in revolutionary movements.²⁶ As women take to the streets in their thousands today over all sorts of issues, his remarks resonate today – only this time women have a hundred more reasons to take on capitalism, a hundred more skills to do it and as part of the working class like never before.

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 - 11 Marx-inspired writers like Stephanie Coontz also reject terms like 'the Patriarchy' for being ahistorical, and for focusing more on interpersonal relationships than on overall social relations See Coontz, *Capitalism and the family* Jacobin Vol 1, No 4, 2018, <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no4/capitalism-and-the-family-an-interview-with-stephanie-coontz>
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 - 13 Joanne O'Connor, 'Tackle gender inequality by investing in care' *Oxfam Ireland*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.oxfamireland.org/blog/inequality>
 - 14 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, p44 (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1974)
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 - 24 It is worth noting here that social reproduction theorists, concerned mainly with how domestic work is linked to capitalism, tend to emphasise 'extra workplace struggles' particularly in the context of the number of struggles of organized labour having fallen. The Engels dimension of the political and economic significance for struggle of women workers as workers, in terms of consciousness, gets rather sidelined in this.
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