

# The cost of care: Covid-19 and women

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**T**he coronavirus has shone a light into the deep inequalities in the foundation of the capitalist system. The establishment narrative that we are ‘in it together’ has been disproven repeatedly, as those who were already struggling the most have been forced to shoulder the economic and social repercussions of the pandemic. Elderly and immunocompromised people have been told to put their lives on hold to allow the government to ‘reopen’ the economy while the virus continues to run rampant. Low-paid, migrant workers in meat processing plants and care homes have been particularly vulnerable throughout the pandemic, with zero protections or rights to sick pay. Women have also been disproportionately affected. In particular, the shift to lockdown and the subsequent sporadic reopening of the economy witnessed over the past months has reframed the issue of women’s oppression.

The reliance on women to perform unpaid care duties in the home, so long taken for granted, has now been thrown into the spotlight as people are called upon to stay at home. It has been widely reported that women are already bearing the brunt of the economic cost of the pandemic, including in mainstream news sources. In July, the BBC published an article entitled ‘Coronavirus: Will women have to work harder after the pandemic?’<sup>1</sup> The *Guardian* went even further in June, with Gaby Hinsliff reporting on ‘The coronavirus backlash: how the pandemic is destroying women’s rights’.<sup>2</sup> Though these articles report the symptoms, they fail to acknowledge the root cause which has created this dynamic. It is not the pandemic which has created these conditions, it is capitalism. The reality is that although the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated many issues surrounding women’s rights, women were already working ‘harder’ before the pandemic. Furthermore, the isolation of the home has led to a dramatic rise in cases of domestic abuse, at a time when supports are

at their most minimal. A Marxist interpretation of women’s oppression gives us the tools to understand the role women play in the system, what this has meant during the pandemic, and what we can achieve moving forward.

The call to ‘stay at home’ and the global shift to lockdown put immense pressure on those already fulfilling caring roles in society. Before moving on to examine these dynamics created by the pandemic, it is first vital to establish what ‘care’ means under capitalism. Capitalism depends on care in the home to create a sustained force of workers; without workers, profits could not be generated. Rest and socialisation are essential to maintaining a workforce which can get up the following day to begin work anew. This can be described as reproducing labour power. The value of labour power is what its reproduction costs, though this is a fraction of the work carried out during the day, the rest of which is appropriated by the employer as surplus value. Though the value of labour power is supplemented by things like education, healthcare, and various forms of welfare, the majority of this takes place in the home. What makes the home different is that care is provided there for free. As such, we can see how care in the home is not some ‘private’ or ‘additional’ bonus for the system—it is integral to maintaining it. Furthermore, what is reproduced is not just the economic category of labour-power but also the living labourer themselves, an acculturated historical being, a self who—as described by Marx and Gramsci—is the nexus of social relations and social activities.<sup>3</sup> This acknowledgement allows us to realise the gendered and racialized dynamics integral to capitalism itself. It may be surprising then to note that Marx offers no serious discussion of how labour power is produced and reproduced in the famously unfinished *Capital*. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that caring roles have historically been

delegated to women. The gap in this explanation led some to believe that Marxist theories were not enough, and that a 'dualist' explanation was required to interpret all the varied forms of oppression. For instance, some feminist writers began to investigate 'patriarchy' theory to understand women's oppression. However, from the 1970s, writers such as Lise Vogel began to return to Marx-based understandings of the origins of women's oppression under capitalism. Though it does not answer all the questions, it is nevertheless a useful avenue of inquiry for this article as it provokes anti-capitalist and radical solutions to the issue of women's oppression.

'Social reproduction theory' (which is unpacked at length in the article 'Capitalism: a system stacked against women' by myself and Marnie Holborow, published in the *IMR* earlier this year) allows us to account for the reproduction of life (or labour power) so vital to capitalist accumulation and its gendered dynamic. It begins with an analysis of one of the preconditions of capitalism Marx did not examine at length: the production, sale, and purchase of labour-power itself, the commodity whose consumption inevitably produces more value than it costs. Theorists like Vogel and Michael Lebowitz began to ask how labour power is produced, where it is produced, and to what end. Does it count as production in the Marxist sense? Though these questions have much broader implications, they emerged from a Marxist-feminist lens. Most of the literature on this subject developed from feminist inquiries into the family-household and the role of domestic (or caring) work under capitalism. As has been briefly alluded to, women have predominantly been responsible for filling these roles. As we have seen, the contradictory relationship between life making and capitalism's tendencies toward dispossession and accumulation is worked out in real, living workers' social relations; these relations are the core reason for women's historical subjugation in the home. In most countries in the Global North, the inclusion of women in the workforce en masse is a relatively recent development. This has come about at a remarkable pace in Ireland. In the North, the 2018 figures for women working was 66.7 percent; participation rates fell for women with young children, but women were most likely to be in paid work during the ages of 35–49.<sup>4</sup> In the South, more than 77 percent of women were active in the workforce in 2018. This was an increase from 72 percent in the decade since 2009, and

a far greater increase from previous decades. In 1971 the participation rate of women aged 25–64 was just 20 percent. In just under fifty years, the female workforce in Ireland has almost quadrupled. This development arises from the fact that as capitalism has grown it has required an ever-expanding pool of workers to sustain itself. This has led to the situation where women are tied between motherhood/childcare, paid work, and a qualified 'liberated' sexuality (on male-dominated terms). Furthermore, women continue to be paid less than men, and where women take up roles previously filled by men, wages are shown to drop.

The 'double shift' faced by women, who are increasingly joining the workforce whilst maintaining the lion's share of childcare duties at home, is very clear. However, with more and more women working from home throughout the pandemic, these two shifts have merged. This raises some interesting questions for social reproduction theorists. Added to the 'normal' work and housework duties has been the need to assist school-age children whilst schools were closed. The call to 'stay at home' has thrown out the separation of the 'public' workplace and the 'private' home, a division which, as has been discussed, has been taken for granted under capitalism. This is an easier task when there are two parents who can alternate working hours and childcare, but for most this is unattainable. In writing on 'Capitalism's Crisis of Care', Nancy Fraser has discussed how the 'two-earner family' model has been presented as an aspirational model under 'financial' capitalism.<sup>5</sup> She contrasts this with the 'separate spheres' model of liberal capitalism and the 'family wage' of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> This reflects the fact that it has increasingly become impossible to support a family on one wage, though it remains the duty of individual parents to find childcare outside the home. This model does not consider families with elderly or disabled dependents, or single parents (90 percent of whom are women, in the Irish context). Grandparents, who are often relied upon to assist with childcare, are classed as 'at risk' during the pandemic, thus narrowing the options for lone parents even further. Many are now struggling with working from home without any childcare provision to allow them to perform their work. This situation has meant that more and more single mothers have been forced to leave their jobs or apply for positions on furlough lists to cope. It is vital to note that, prior to the pandemic,

employment for single mothers remained almost impossible given the high cost of childcare in Ireland. The example of lone parents serves to highlight the contradiction at the heart of care under capitalism: though more and more women are being drawn into the workforce, the state is incapable of delivering basic services (such as childcare) to facilitate this.

The rush to reopen schools has revealed how the provision of care in Ireland is untenable. Even the highest ‘Living with Covid’ level sees that schools remain open. This shows how—far from prioritising education and development—schools first and foremost act as a warehouse for children and teenagers during the working day. Though schooling costs are mounting year on year, the cost of childcare outside the school remains even more inaccessible. Indeed, Irish parents pay approximately 28 percent of their income on childcare, compared with the EU average of 12 percent. However, even before the pandemic, the majority of childcare has been done in the home. As Marnie Holborow reported in her recent *Rebel News* article, ‘Capitalism and the Home’, 50 percent of childcare is undertaken by the family, as compared with 34 percent with a childminder and 25 percent with a creche, play group, or after-school group (some children use more than one type of childcare). In the North, 47 percent of childcare is done by a family, 26 percent at a nursery, 18 percent out of school, and 4 percent with a childminder.<sup>7</sup>

Even for those that can afford it, childcare options outside the home have been totally diminished during the pandemic. There was a brief window in May when childcare provisions were made for frontline health-care workers by both the Southern government and the Northern Executive, but these services were available only during normal schooling hours—little help for those on night shifts or working overtime. Now that schools are reopened, no such facilities are available. The government’s attempt to fast track the economy back to ‘normal’, where children are in school and workers are in work, has not only led to a massive spike in cases but has also preserved the ‘double shift’ women have to endure.

The impossible situation for women created by the call to ‘stay at home’ has thrown the contradiction at the heart of social reproduction theory into the spotlight. When the perceived divide between the workplace and the home was dissolved, women were the first to

lose out. This situation is set to continue as further restrictions and a potential second lockdown loom on the horizon. A recent study from European think-tank Eurofound reported on how the pandemic has adversely affected women and young people. It reported that the pandemic has disproportionately affected women worker’s ‘work-life balance’. For those working from home, reduced working hours owing to increased childcare obligations was reported as contributing to increased job losses for women. As women are shown to earn less, for those in two-earner households it is difficult to win the argument as to why they should not be the ones to cut their working hours and take up more of the childcare duties.

This has illustrated the value of unpaid labour in the home, as women are losing more and more of the wage they earn to carry out care duties. Prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that Irish women added an additional €24 billion to the economy and put in 38 million hours of unpaid labour.<sup>8</sup> This calculation is now impossible to make given the call to stay at home, though it has undoubtedly increased. Beyond the issues affecting women alone, the fact that ‘care’ is taken for granted under capitalism is also starkly highlighted by the fact that carers in Ireland continue to be paid close to the minimum wage, or less, despite adding over €10 billion to the economy. The attitude that care is a ‘natural’ duty, whether for women or for those in the caring professions, serves to reinforce the economic exploitation of people filling these roles.

In mainstream media such as the articles referenced in the introduction, the arguments surrounding gender inequality and Covid-19 have focused predominantly on those working from home. This demonstrates how the stark inequalities brought into focus by the pandemic have become too dramatic, too sharp, to ignore. However, the greater portion of these articles has been on women in high-paying executive positions who, owing to the extra pressures on their careers, are losing out to their male counterparts. In particular, the lack of ‘flexible’ conditions for those working from home has been highlighted as the main issue that must be overcome to achieve gender equality in the workplace, during and after Covid-19. Working from home has even been heralded as a standard to follow going forward, allowing women to fulfil caring duties more conveniently whilst still working for a wage! These experiences and solutions

do not speak to most working women. Indeed, though it is true that wealthy women experience sexist discrimination, they rarely experience the material deprivation that working women must overcome every day. These conditions have been worsened by the pandemic, particularly for those who cannot work from home.

To begin with, it was women who were most hit by redundancies in the early stages of the pandemic, as female-dominated industries such as retail and hairdressing were essentially shut overnight. Though these sectors have witnessed a stop-start reopening, many women made redundant are still without a job. The recent slashes to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the end of the eviction ban, combined with the persistent decline in jobs, have created an impossible situation for workers. Globally speaking, most essential workers who have been on the frontline throughout the pandemic have been women. Though men make up most of the workforce in normal times, the pandemic has flipped that on its head. An examination of the composition of essential employees in Ireland has found that 70 percent of essential workers are women, and just over half of all essential workers have children. A study by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) revealed that nursing and midwifery professions in Ireland are over 90 percent female. From the checkout worker in the supermarket to the emergency room nurse to the hospital cleaner to the pharmacist to the home carer, women have disproportionately faced the virus head-on by continuing to work throughout the pandemic. Teachers, who worked throughout the pandemic to deliver online classes and supports for students, have now been thrust into the firing line of overcrowded, unsafe classrooms. An EU survey in 2016 revealed that almost nine out of every ten teachers at primary level (87 percent), and more than seven in ten at post-primary level (71 percent), are women—though in Ireland, the figure at primary level is slightly higher.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the pandemic, the government has failed to ensure the safety of these workplaces or to provide adequate PPE for essential workers. One in four cases of Covid-19 in the South has been reported in health-care workers, compared with just 8.3 percent in Italy, where the hospitals were dramatically overrun earlier this year. More dramatically, Ireland is one of the only countries where more women than men are presenting with Covid-19 (approximately 57 percent of cases) and a very small amount more are dying from it.<sup>10</sup> Minister for

Health Stephen Donnelly had no answers as to why this was the case when quizzed by World Health Organisation officials. However, there are some obvious reasons we can put forward: Most of our healthcare workers are women, as are care workers in private homes and nursing homes. Given their lack of protections, it comes as little surprise women in Ireland are suffering more from the virus in a physical, as well as an economic and social, sense. Within the medical profession, a gulf exists between genders. As the INMO survey revealed, women take up lower-paid, more hours-intensive jobs compared to men. Consider the difference in treatment between nurses and consultants: Nurses who retrained to re-enter the workforce during the pandemic were not only faced with significant costs, but many were employed through a private contractor, thus barring them from things like hazard pay entitlements. Meanwhile, the consultants have been very timidly offered contracts to work in the public sector by the government, knowing very well that the government will concede to their demands. Thus, the gendered aspects of the divide between public and private healthcare become apparent on closer analysis.

It has been established that Irish women are becoming more isolated in the home, more burdened with childcare duties, more overworked, and are even dying in increased numbers throughout the pandemic. These issues are all intrinsically linked with the fact that women are disproportionately expected to carry out the duties necessary to maintain and reproduce the workforce each day, even in the midst of a global crisis. That the capitalist system must grind on through a pandemic, no matter the cost, reveals its fundamental contradictions. As alluded to previously, what is being discussed is not abstract theory but the makings of the day-to-day lives of almost every working person: where their food comes from, where they sleep, how they are clothed, how they socialise. Furthermore, this dynamic is worked out in their concrete social relations.

Part and parcel of this is the alienation that affects all our human relationships under capitalism. The isolated, atomised conditions involved in working from home and under lockdown have undoubtedly compounded alienation for many. One of the tragic ways that the issues of alienation and gendered oppression converge is in domestic violence, which has dramatically risen since the start of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic,

in Ireland, around 15 percent of women and 6 percent of men had experienced severe domestic violence from a partner, and most women who were intentionally killed in Ireland were killed by a current or former intimate partner. Despite the known increase in intimate partner violence during major economic recessions, domestic violence services have witnessed eight years of austerity and cuts to funding during and since the crash. The situation facing victims of abuse during the pandemic could have been predicted, but it was overlooked until the government was forced to act.

In April, the United Nations secretary-general, António Guterres, called on governments to address the ‘horrificing global surge in domestic violence’.<sup>11</sup> In Ireland, organisations such as Women’s Aid report an increase in the number of calls to their helplines, and the Gardaí reported a 25 percent increase in domestic violence calls in April-May 2020 compared to April-May 2019. The financial deprivation created for many by the pandemic, combined with the increased social isolation, has meant that an ever-increasing number of women are experiencing domestic violence. For women who already experienced domestic violence, the call to stay at home has meant being trapped with their abusers. In response to this, a public awareness campaign was launched, and €160,000 for frontline groups like Women’s Aid, Rape Crisis Centre, and the Men’s Development Network was granted. However, given that the state has utterly debilitated the support sector via austerity measures prior to the pandemic, this does not go far enough. Women in Ireland have been deterred from speaking out or seeking help for years, owing to the lack of options available. Most domestic violence services are underfunded and unable to meet the numbers of women and children seeking support. There are just 19 refuge centres and 38 domestic violence services in Ireland, while nine counties have none. The pandemic has made the communal spaces of the refuges unsafe, and the fact that they are often full makes social distancing impossible.

Women have shouldered some of the greatest burdens of the pandemic, but they have also been at the forefront of almost every important struggle. It should come as little surprise that the sectors which are dominated by women (such as nursing, retail, and teaching) have experienced the greatest job losses and most unsafe conditions. For these women, fighting back is a matter of survival. The former Debenhams workers who, at the time of writing,

have been manning picket lines across the country for over six months remain a shining example to all workers in Ireland facing redundancy. Since the very start of the pandemic, and Debenhams closure, they have been steadfastly demanding a fair redundancy package and have refused to quietly disappear. Most of the workers who have been manning these picket lines have been women, many with children and families to support. In the United States, throughout the summer, nurses formed pickets outside hospitals to demand proper PPE. As demonstrated in the massive nurses’ strike of spring 2019, when these vital, ‘caring’ workers stop, the healthcare system stops. Workers facing redundancy or being made to work in unsafe conditions should look to the militant examples set by women across the globe throughout the pandemic.

The contradiction and exploitation at the heart of ‘care’ under capitalism has been starkly exposed by the pandemic. Never before has the double burden on women been made clearer, or been more widely discussed. Moreover, the ‘caring’ professions so long dominated by women are undergoing serious reappraisal. Jobs such as nursing and teaching, which have often been framed as vocational, are now being shown for what they are: essential. The appraisal of care as essential to society will be an important part of fighting for women’s liberation and the fight against capitalism.

## 22 Endnotes

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  - 3 Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, 1932 ; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 352, International Publishers Co., 1971.
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  - 9 Sean Murray, 'Union wants to address gender imbalance among Irish teachers', *The Journal*, [accessed 07 Sept. 2020], <<https://www.thejournal.ie/gender-imbalance-irish-teachers-3018754-Oct2016/>>
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  - 11 UN News, 'UN chief calls for domestic violence "cease-fire" amid "horrifying global surge"', [accessed Apr. 6, 2020], <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052> >
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