

Homes, Gender and Capitalism

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Capitalism depends on individual households to keep the system ticking over, but their composition, functions and gender stereotypes are also destabilised by capitalist developments. More women in paid work calls into question the capitalist model of the home and presents new opportunities for taking on gender oppression.



The pandemic showed how important homes are to our society. Staying at home became the way to save lives. A large chunk of social life, including paid work, schooling and extra childcare, was now taking place in individual homes.

For some, home was a house, for others, four walls of one room, for others, a cramped apartment shared with other renters. For older people and refugees, home was a dangerous institution in which there was greater risk of contagion. For those with no place to call home, they managed as best as they could. Domestic abuse and mental health issues soared. But what COVID did was to bring the normally hidden abode of home into plain sight.

Social Reproduction

The role of individual households in capitalism, and the care work that they provide, is often described as part of the social reproduction of capitalism, a term derived from Marx.¹ The main idea is that capitalism, which relies on exploitation of workers for its profit-making, needs a continuous supply of the one commodity that it cannot produce—labour power. Producing a new generation of people who will work, raising them, looking after their daily needs, caring for them when they are sick, providing a place to live, all these things happen mainly via individual families and households. Education, health and welfare systems also play a key role in supplying an educated, skilled and socialised workforce, but these too depend on the care that homes provide. The activities of individual households keep the system going, and it is women, particularly working-class women, who bear the brunt.

Social reproduction theorists have explained, from a Marxist point of view, the relationship between capitalist exploitation and domestic labour. Against dual patriarchy-capitalism theories, they articulate a cogent, unitary theory of women's oppression; that is, that it arises from the class relations of capitalism.² Their views have resonated with the new anti-capitalist radicalism of many gender and reproductive rights activists.

Social reproduction theorists are not uncritical of Marx, however. They make the claim, echoing some intersectional accounts, that Marx and Engels focused too much on class exploitation in production and were guilty of undertheorising gender oppression. They propose various ways of addressing this perceived gap. Tithi Bhattacharya, for example, argues that since capitalist exploitation of waged labour depends on unpaid labour in the home, social reproduction must be 'recentered' within Marxist political economy and redefined as an essence category of capitalism.³

This article presents an alternative Marxist view of the relationship between household social reproduction and capitalism. Firstly, the form, character and features of homes are forced to adapt to the needs and priorities of capital and are therefore in a constant state of change. Thus, homes can be

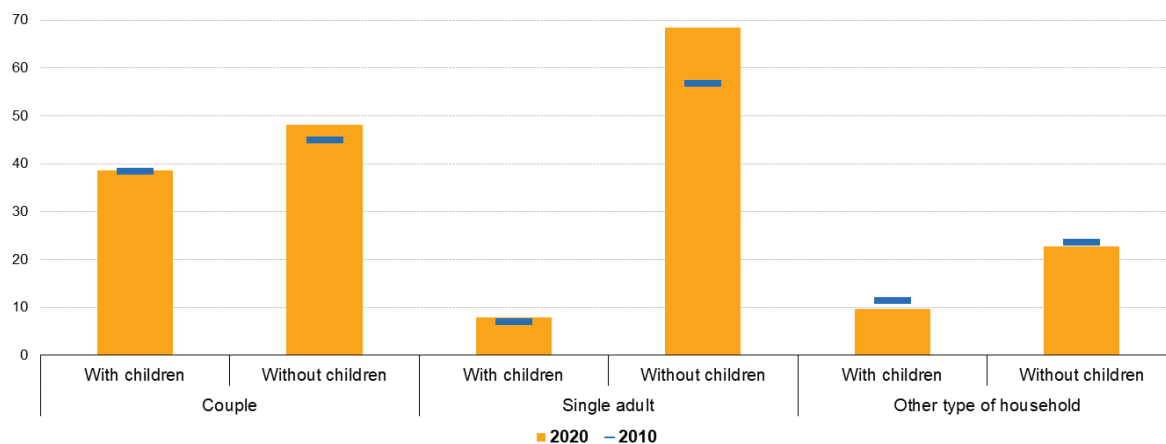
understood, not as the economic foundation of capitalism, but as part of what Marx, and others, termed the superstructure. Secondly, individualised social reproduction in the home does not just have an economic function. Marx and Engels stressed the ideological role that the (ruling-class) family played for capitalist society. Today, too, capitalist ideologies of the home are powerful. They hold out an idealised version of home life which serves to bolster a certain kind of individualism and market consumerism and to perpetuate a gendered view of social reproductive

very processes of social reproduction upon which it relies.⁴

In the absence of comprehensive state-provided services, individual households have increasingly carried the cost. This has class implications. Women in better and well-paid jobs can employ other people, often immigrant women from the Global South, to perform domestic and care work that society refuses to fully provide. The care deficit in the Global North has created a care drain from the Global South. Arlie

Households by type and presence of children in the EU, in 2010 and in 2020

(in millions)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: lfst_hhhntych)

eurostat

labour, all of which add to the pressures of home life. Thirdly, the capitalist separation between unpaid work in the home and paid work in the workplace, and women's ever growing role in the latter, heightens the tensions between individual households and the capitalist system, and opens new avenues for challenging them.

Homes under Pressure

All aspects of social reproduction—including education, health systems and welfare provision—are constantly subjected to the priorities of capital. A three-decade long neoliberal assault on public services has put social reproduction institutions under strain and led to a crisis of care. As Nancy Fraser aptly puts it, the paradox is that 'capital's drive to accelerated accumulation, tends to destabilise the

Russell Hochschild and Barbara Ehrenreich have charted the phenomenal growth of the paid-domestic-labour market, dubbing it 'the commodification of home life.'⁵ It has been estimated that some 400 million people worldwide are doing paid domestic work and au-pairing. The figure for Europe alone is 26 million people, although with much of the work not being officially registered, this leaves out undocumented migrant workers, reckoned to amount to at least one million.⁶

Working-class women, obviously, are less able to outsource care. They must rely on friends and grandmothers to provide a significant proportion of childcare on an unpaid basis. In 2019 in Ireland, for example, 16 percent of primary-school-age children were cared for by an unpaid relative or friend.⁷ Across the EU, 61 percent of families in the lowest

income bracket rely on this type of informal childcare.⁸

Changing Household Composition

Homes have changed unrecognisably from a few decades ago in their composition, work and activities. As many more women have entered paid work, the number of families headed by males has declined and the amount of time women spend in the home has altered. Across the EU, over the period 2010–20, single-adult households (i.e., households consisting of only one adult, living with or without children) have increased faster than other categories, and as the figure below shows, they are now close behind households made up of a couple.⁹

Average household size has gotten smaller everywhere, reflecting a decline in fertility rates. Today in Europe and Northern America, only a minority of households (and in Germany less than one household in five) counts a child among its members.¹⁰ Also, one-parent households have become more common. The proportion varies across the EU, but among six member states in 2022, over 20 percent of households were one parent, with Sweden at 34 percent, Denmark at 29 percent and France at 21 percent.¹¹ Recent Irish census figures show that one in four families in Ireland is a one-parent family, and 86 percent of these are headed by a mother.¹² One-parent families account for 21.3 percent of all families in Northern Ireland.¹³ These changes go against some earlier feminist claims that characterised domestic labour as being imposed on women by men for their benefit. In many individual households, men are not present, so to understand the function of domestic labour, and the basis of gender oppression, we need to look to wider social explanations.

With falling incomes and increased care needs, alongside wider access to reproductive rights, more women are deciding to limit the numbers of children they have—or not to have them at all. On the other hand,

advances in reproductive technologies, especially over the last 50 years, have contributed to transformations in household composition. They have enabled more people, and people of different genders, to become parents—if they can afford it.¹⁴ In other words, from whatever point of view, the nuclear family—two biological parents and their 2.4 children—is seriously on the wane, in the Global North at least.

Generational composition within households has also changed. Eurostat figures for Ireland from 2020 show that 40 percent of 25–29-year-olds were living at home.¹⁵ Homes have become more cramped as children return to the parental home due to rising rents and house prices.

Tasks and work in the home have also been altered by the greater commodification of goods and services. The availability of ready-made meals has reduced time spent on food preparation, and cooking and has altered eating routines. A range of new activities have entered the home: remote learning and home working, enabled by greater household access to high-speed broadband. All these factors have impacted significantly on the role and daily tasks that homes provide in capitalism.¹⁶

It should also be noted, in passing, that it is not only private households that reproduce and replenish ready-to-work labour. Social reproduction of some labour takes place under different, harsher circumstances: in immigrant hostels or caravans for migrant agricultural labourers. The social reproduction of immigrant labour—which makes up anything between 10 to 20 percent of the workforce of the Global North—costs states nothing, as immigrant labourers have been raised and educated elsewhere.

Homes and the Capitalist System

Changes to the composition of households in late capitalism in the Global North, are driven by different factors: increased numbers of women working; wider choices in some cases about having children; extra

care demands and other things besides. Too narrow a focus on the economic role that households play in the reproduction of labour power, or on the gender relations within them, can overlook the extent of these changes and the new contradictions that they create.

The Marxist superstructure-base frame makes the distinction between social, political, legal and ideological institutions, which are subject to immediate changes, and the capitalist forces and social relations of production which, outside revolutions, form the relatively stable basis for the whole social order. The relationship between the two is not predictable or inevitable, nor is it structurally determined. However, framing things in this way recognises that some aspects of capitalist society are more fundamentally determining than others, which is relevant here.¹⁷ The distinction allows us to capture how homes, and unpaid work within them, like the wider social reproduction of welfare, health and education, are forced to adapt to the imperatives of capital, and that developments in the superstructure of society can present contradictions for the capitalist system itself. The individual household is a creation which suits the needs of capitalist accumulation but is also undermined by it. Capitalism cannot resolve this contradiction because the profit motive prevents it from investing enough state funds into comprehensive care provision.¹⁸

Unpaid and Paid Work

Keeping in mind the broader perspective of the role of households in capitalism, it becomes obvious that gender-based labour discrimination does not spring from the gendered division of labour in the home, which is then reproduced across society. Rather, it is the other way round. The gendered division of labour in the home is socially constructed from capitalism's privatisation of care and from its separation between unpaid and paid labour. Capital needs female waged labour, but it does not provide the necessary social funding to support more women in paid work; individual households fill that crucial gap. Because working-class women in particular bear disproportionately the burden of unpaid work, they must seek paid work which fits in with care tasks.

This directs women into part-time, precarious and low-paid work. Prescribed care roles thus see women workers pushed to the bottom of the labour market.

In addition, care work is branded ideologically as lesser work. Productive labour is what creates surplus value, and work in the home, mainly done by women, does not directly do this and is therefore marginalised. Despite care work being a pretty basic requirement in any society, in capitalism it is judged to be less skilled and of low value.

Seeing the way work in the home is linked to the capitalist economy allows us to understand the specific nature of that work. Labour in the home is different to labour in commodity production; they are interconnected but not equivalent. As Lise Vogel points out, the processes that make up the reproduction of labour power are not comparable from a theoretical point of view. The reproduction of labour power is one the conditions of production 'as it reposit or replaces the labour power necessary for production; it is not itself a form of production.'¹⁹ The household is the place where use values are produced for immediate consumption, whereas in a factory, an office or a workplace, exchange values are produced and surplus value extracted through the employer's control of the labour process. Marx termed the two types of work *productive consumption* (in the social labour process) and *individual consumption* (as a means of subsistence in the household).²⁰ If work at home appears to follow a specific logic of meeting the needs of individuals, it is in fact productive to the capitalist, since it produces, on a daily basis, a force—labour power—and therefore, as Marx sardonically noted, it actually produces wealth for other people.²¹

It is what people earn—a wage or salary—that is the link between the household and wider social relations and the major determinant of the quality of home life.²² It is also obvious that unpaid work and consumption in the home take place under different conditions than paid labour. The work done for wages belongs to the capitalist, but, as Marx put it, in the necessary and vital tasks within the home 'the worker belongs to themselves.'²³ Or so it appears. In reality, social reproductive labour in the home is tied to the wage in ways which also reproduce the alienation of the wage system itself.

Households, Gender Status and Modes of Production

Care and household work may be little valued in capitalism, but this has not always been the case. Forms of household labour are highly variable and have different roles in different modes of production. In early pre-class societies, this work had a different social significance and was not associated with women's oppression. In hunter-gatherer societies, as anthropologist Eleanor Burke Leacock has shown, women had greater autonomy because they controlled both their conditions of work and the dispensation of the goods they produced. In her studies of the Montagnais-Naskapi peoples of the Labrador peninsula in Eastern Canada, she described how the corn, meat, fish, berries and furs they prepared and stored gave them de facto power to make political and societal decisions. The direct relation between production and consumption was linked to the dispersal of authority across society.



Household management in these societies, Leacock notes, was of a different order from the management of the nuclear family in patriarchal, capitalist societies, because, in earlier societies, the household was part of the public economy.²⁴ In pre-class

societies, women's role in the communal household, which often contained many couples and their children, was socially recognised for its vital economic contribution, and was seen as just as important as the hunting for food often done by men.²⁵ In capitalism, by contrast, household management lost its public character and became a private, hidden service, a point which Engels stressed in his writings on the family.²⁶

Even in class societies, labour in the domestic sphere was sometimes more visibly integrated with that of surplus production than it is in capitalism. In feudalism, peasant women's work was indispensable to agricultural production, and housewifery included tasks related to cultivation and some commodity production as well as housework and childcare. In comparison to capitalism, domestic work among the peasantry formed a smaller proportion of women's total labour, not least because the span of childhood was much more brief in those times.²⁷ Feudal class society was, however, cruelly gender oppressive. In pre-revolutionary Russia, for example, in peasant families it was customary for the bride's father to give the groom a new whip so he could exercise his authority if he wished. Accounts of the time describe how the whip hung over the marriage bed as a stark reminder of feudal patriarchal authority.²⁸

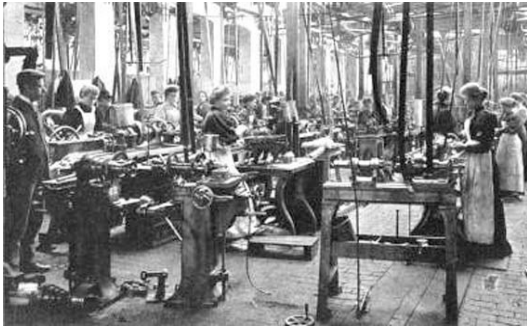
In other precapitalist peasant societies, women's status was different. Writing about Irish pre-famine rural society, Goretta Horgan notes the essential productive role that women's agricultural labour performed in the household. While the man provided land and farming skills to grow the staple crop of potatoes, the woman brought weaving and spinning skills, which provided extra money for the needs of the household. Female household work made an essential contribution to the economy right up to its transformation into the industrial factory after the Famine. Women's contribution to economic life impacted attitudes to marriage and sex, which were freer before the stifling repression of the Catholic Church set in.²⁹

In other words, the existence of a sexual division of labour (i.e., with different tasks allocated on the basis of gender) is not in itself the determining factor regarding women's oppression in any one society. To see it as such is to project backwards the way we the

way we see families and households in capitalism and to assume it has always been thus. Domestic labour, and the roles and social standing of gender within it, depends on the functions of households and the sexual division of labour within a specific mode of production.

Male Controlled?

Writers who focus on patriarchy do not generally accept that the social status of household labour is determined by the mode of production, seeing it rather as the result of gender power relations. Silvia Federici, noting that in feudalism women had greater



Mill workers in Rochdale Lancashire 1911

control over their productive and reproductive work, argues that the advent of capitalism instituted, via violent repression and witch-hunting, the erasure of this autonomy and the introduction of more oppressive male–female relations. For her, the process of capitalist primitive accumulation involved the taming of the female body into a machine to produce new workers via a new domestic regime, through which women were excluded from wage labour and women’s work was put to the service of men.³⁰ Thus, for Federici, the transition from feudalism to capitalism represents a backwards step for women, imposed by men.

This is to miss the main social forces behind the change in households from feudalism to capitalism. Primitive accumulation, for Marx, was a process which involved the dispossession of the peasants of land, their separation from the means of production

and the creation of ‘free’ labour. Land enclosures and colonisation were the brutal means by which an emerging capitalist class concentrated the means of production and imposed its control over labour.

Federici interprets primitive accumulation, not as class struggle over the means of production, but as an exercise of force and repression, elements which she sees as the prime movers of history and also of gender relations. Her interpretation of capitalism is that it ushered in a more intense degradation of women in which women were forcibly taken away from working directly on the land and confined to a new type of male-controlled household. Most obviously, this interpretation brushes to one side the harsh oppression women suffered under feudalism. It also dismisses the fact that capitalism represented an advance in terms of some freedoms, in that it gave the producer class much more collective clout than they had under feudalism. But it also skips over the different forms the transition to capitalism took in different countries.³¹ In Britain, for example, it was not the case that early capitalist wage labour was mainly male. Many of the new capitalist textile industries were dependent on women, who often worked at home as part of the putting-out system in which knitting and sewing were household based before they became mechanised in factories. Federici’s account eclipses the many thousands of women workers whose paid work drove the industrial revolution, first home based and later factory based.

A large amount of waged labour in the nineteenth century in England was domestic service, a very large proportion of which was made up of women.³²

In her latest book, *The Patriarchy of the Wage*, Federici returns to the theme of male enforcement of a repressive sexual contract in the home. Her claim is that the individual assertion of male power was a means by which men recuperated on the home front the power that they lost in the workplace. Thus, for Federici, male–female relations in the household become a key struggle—between the man (the boss) and the woman housewife (the worker). In the late 1970s, Federici and others raised the demand for ‘wages for housework’ in order to expose this domestic exploitation, a position which she still defends.³³

Presenting ‘being a housewife’ as the main problem, Angela Davis pointed out when Federici first articulated her view, leaves out class differences and is reflective of a middle-class, white bias. Working-class and Black women seldom have the option to become stay-at-home wives.³⁴ Given the large numbers of women in paid employment, a focus on housewifery connects even less with working women today. But crucially, making male exploitation of women the crux of home life reduces gender oppression to individual relations between men and women, and pushes into the background the social role of homes and how they meet the needs of capital.

Capitalist Construction of Home

The functions of the household remain necessary for a capitalist economy based, as described earlier, on wage labour. On this foundation, capitalism has constructed a heavy ideological edifice, which misogynistically lays down the law regarding women’s supposed ‘natural’ domestic role. In ruling-class ideology, the individual home unit has long been held up as the rock of society.

In Ireland, the version of the ideology that we are familiar with is a narrow, repressive one, overlaid with Catholicism. Even today in Ireland, despite the contemporary diversity of households, the only legally recognised family remains that created through marriage. Article 41 of the Irish Constitution still declares the family to be the ‘natural, primary and fundamental unit group of society,’ and pledges ‘to protect it against attack.’ Article 41.1, which states that ‘mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home,’ is currently under discussion for removal. A citizens assembly last year proposed that either the clause be simply removed or that it be replaced by one that recognises the vital role of caring in the home. Some have rightly suggested that state support for caring should also be included.

That such sexist clauses have remained so long in our constitution is shocking. However, the family as the basic unit of society is not only a Catholic or religious concept; neoliberal capitalism likes the idea too. The nuclear family is the rational choice for people looking to succeed in the capitalist market. Neoliberal sociologist Gary Becker was a great

supporter of the nuclear family: it was good for child outcomes, good for adults (as childcare could be shared), the best way maximising social capital and conveniently a system that cost society very little.³⁵

Reducing state spending in favour of the market required reinforcing individual homes and families. ‘Neoliberals must ultimately delegate power to social conservatives to realise their vision of a naturally equilibrating free-market order and a spontaneously self-sufficient family,’ writer on conservative views of the family Melinda Cooper observes.³⁶ She stresses how much, in crisis-prone capitalism, the individual home becomes the social safety net for the marketisation of services. Amid rising healthcare and education costs and the increasing burden of student debt, care services are transferred more and more from the state into individual homes, adding to the pressures of declining living standards for the working class. The home and the capitalist market have become fatefully intertwined: the one expected to compensate for the failures of the other.

The capitalist view of the home is one which masks the social role that households play. The dominant narrative of individualism tells us that capitalism operates on the basis of self-reliance and personal responsibility, a core aspect of which is the family. In this schema, the economic role that homes play in the system as a whole is simply left out.

Of course, it is obvious that nobody sets up home or decides to have children with the idea that they are providing for the maintenance of the workforce or reproducing the next generation of workers. Rather, a range of hopes, plans, aspirations and beliefs surround the idea of home. These may correspond to social expectations but also to the real desire to have control over one’s life and to meet needs not provided anywhere else. Homes play a protective role in a poor and predatory society.³⁷ Hence why conservative views on the family can achieve a certain resonance.

‘Family Values’

From Italy to Brazil, from Spain to Russia, ‘family values’—involving a narrow and exclusionary conception of home—are used for specific political ends. At events like the World Congress of Families,

priests, bishops, government ministers and politicians of neo-fascist and far-right parties come together to praise the ‘natural family.’ The ‘feminist agenda’ at these events is demonised, blamed for disrupting the social order, even accused of bringing the world into a ‘demographic winter’ with not enough babies being born. Parties such as Fidesz in Hungary, La Lega in Italy and Vox in Spain all draw on ‘traditional family values’ to cement their reactionary and ultra-nationalist agendas. Posing as representatives of ‘the pure people,’ these movements rely on sections of the establishment—in particular the Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches—to challenge what they brand as ‘gender ideology.’³⁸ The traditional family they conceive of is, of course, white. Italy’s neo-fascist group Fratelli D’Italia uses the traditional family to boost their racist message of ‘Italians first.’³⁹ As in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, when ‘Kinder, Küche, Kirche’ aimed at keeping women in their place, these parties are seizing the ideological terrain of the family in an attempt to manipulate a social crisis for their racist and misogynistic ends.

In Ireland, the family-values brigade is on the back foot since Repeal, and their far-right ramblings have been restricted to small groups and individuals.⁴⁰ However, the social and political polarisation of our times means that they will not stay in the background. The recent attempt to overturn the *Roe v Wade* right to abortion in the US serves as a stark warning that women’s reproductive rights are constantly under threat and easily weaponised for a far-right agenda.

Homes, Aspirations and Alienation

Variations in household composition and situation affect the experience of home, and despite the ideology, home is not a universal. Those who do work for a salary and wage differ in terms of income, education and occupation, which affects the nature of domestic labour in the home. Dual-earning households on low wages are likely to have a very different range of activities that make up domestic labour than those on higher incomes.

In one of the few Marxist feminist accounts to deal with the contradictory perceptions of home life, Martha Gimenez draws on Marx’s theory of alienation to examine the changing nature of domestic labour today. She argues that while domestic labour is not strictly alienated labour as Marx understood it, it can have alienating effects.⁴¹ One of the physical and psychological effects of alienation is that workers live a divided existence, ‘feeling really alive when not working and not really living while at work,’ which, Gimenez notes, captures something of the profound division between work and life that is the lot of working people in capitalism.



Mass protest at the World Congress of Families in Verona in 2019

Domestic labour, Gimenez writes, can be described as a unity of opposites.⁴² It can oppress because women are expected to bear the main responsibility for it. But homes support our basic needs and can also sometimes be subjectively fulfilling in that they are experienced as spaces of relief from paid work. Some household activities, such as cooking, redecoration or gardening, contain a degree of agency and self-realisation. Depending on the kind of work women do, their access to education, the demands paid work imposes on them and the amount of pleasure and opportunities for self-realisation they find in their paid work, their views of domestic labour and home life will be shaped accordingly.⁴³

But the ideological expectations of home life can themselves be alienating. Dan Swain highlights that Marx linked alienation to the fact that labour, under capitalism, undergoes a process of abstraction, a crucial component of which is time as value, which comes to dominate other aspects of social life besides

work.⁴⁴ Estrangement, commodification, the fixation on time as value and the encroachment on lived time by market time also apply to home life under capitalism. Leisure time, sports and exercise, socialisation and family life are periods in which people are meant to decide themselves what to do and pursue meaningful activities. The problem is that that home life is meant to happen after work, when people are already exhausted, and for many people home is just somewhere where you recover. Even leisure activities are mediated by the market. Sporting and outdoor activities often involve buying things: the necessary gear or equipment, or membership of a gym in which to enjoy them. And of course, even the concept of leisure as ‘non-work’ effaces women’s unpaid work at home.⁴⁵

Perhaps nowhere are the pressures and alienation of home life expressed more disturbingly than in the ever wider prevalence of domestic violence. Most of the violence against women is intimate-partner violence and takes place in the home. Studies estimate that half of women experiencing physical violence by an intimate partner have also been sexually coerced by that partner.⁴⁶ Worldwide, nearly a third of women aged 15 to 49 who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner.⁴⁷ Given this, when people were confined for long periods at home, it is not surprising that across the world the number of calls placed to domestic violence helplines and for emergency shelter grew exponentially. The pandemic revealed just how rife the incidence of domestic and sexual abuse is, and magnified the fact that women are forced to remain in the presence of their abusers because they have nowhere else to go.

The World Health Organisation, reporting on the increase in domestic violence worldwide during COVID, lists the ‘risk factors’ as being those occurring at the individual, family, community and wider society level.⁴⁸ We should add that the system’s total dependence on homes to provide basic care means that it is complicit in the continuation of this very dark side of home life. While states require homes to deliver shelter, rest, respite from work and a host of other human needs, they also leave homes to

deal with all the pent-up problems and attitudes of society, including gender-based violence.

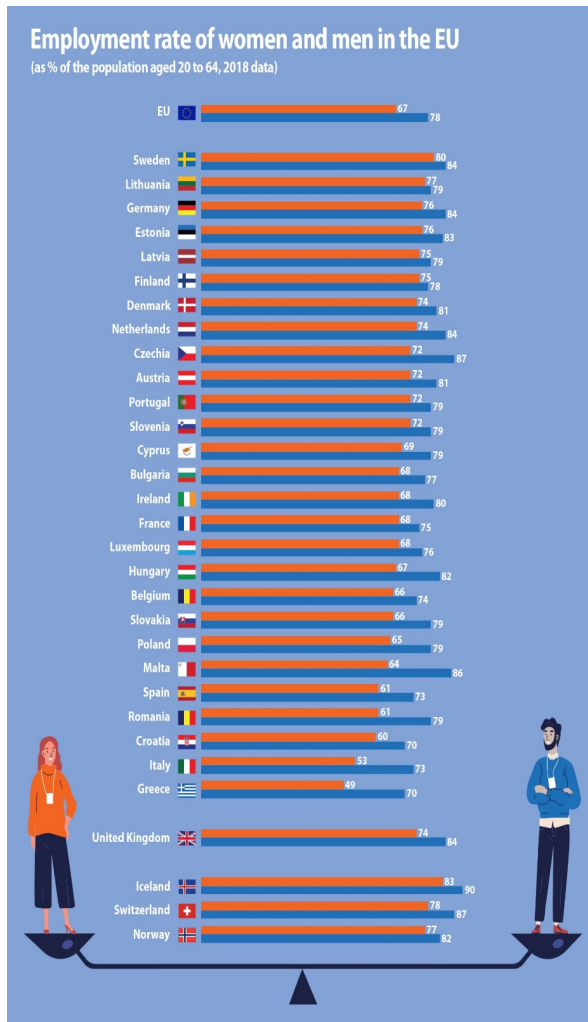
The extent of domestic violence is the clearest signal that homes cannot be left to run as isolated, inadequately supported individual units based on what society considers a natural state of affairs. Trauma from domestic violence and the time women need to rebuild their lives are simply not recognised in welfare systems.⁴⁹ People should have real choices about where and with whom they live. The public provision of varied and different forms of living, including places where women with children can go to get away from abusive and violent situations, is urgently needed. The Nine Counties, No Refuges campaign in Southern Ireland, set up following Ashling Murphy’s murder, is attempting to wrest real results from a government which spouts platitudes but has still delivered little.⁵⁰ In a system in which living is constructed around what suits work in capitalism, where a home is seen as something private and enclosed, the delivery of social support and accommodation for survivors of gender-based violence is just not forthcoming. Such provision would require a society with very different priorities.

Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes

Reactionary ideas of the family as encompassing rigidly enforced gender roles come up against the reality of women’s ever greater participation in paid labour, which unravels these stereotypes. The growth of female workforce participation rates occurred at different times in different countries, but the substantial and continuing increase of women in the workforce remains a striking feature of social change in our time. Not only have women progressively transformed what the working class looks like, but as women workers they have also thereby effectively offered a challenge to the legacy of the dominant model of the capitalist individual household and its misogynistic overtones.

World Bank figures for 2020 show the female labour force as a percentage of the total labour force has steadily risen from 43.7 percent in 2000 to 46.1 percent in 2020.⁵¹ Across the EU, the employment rate for women has increased. The most recent figures from Eurostat show that as a percentage of the

female population (aged between 20 and 64) the employment rate in the European Union (EU) stood at 67 percent, 5 percent up on ten years earlier, as the chart on this page shows.⁵²



ec.europa.eu/eurostat

In countries such as Ireland, the increase has been more recent and the change more striking. As Eddie Conlon has shown in a recent article in this journal, the Irish working class has been transformed by a steady influx of women workers. In the ten years before 2019, while the overall number of employees grew by 53 percent, the number of women at work rose by over 70 percent. Women today make up half of the Irish workforce (up from 28 percent in the late

seventies). The number of married women in paid work has increased by an incredible 85 percent since 1998. Conlon makes the point that several factors have contributed to this huge growth of the female workforce: changing participation in education and demand for labour; changing social norms amid the diminishing influence of the church; women's struggles for greater reproductive freedoms; demographic changes and changing forms of employment; but also, crucially, the stark economic pressure on households, which has forced women out to work to meet the challenge of rising debt levels and housing costs.⁵³ Conlon makes the point that the ethnic diversity of the Irish working class has also increased, and those immigrants are often in jobs similar to those occupied by women, with both sharing, for different reasons, a place at the bottom of the labour market in terms of pay, conditions and number of hours.⁵⁴

These changes have radically altered expectations and challenged gender stereotypes. Engels, Eleanor Marx, Zetkin and Kollontai argued that women's incorporation into paid labour, even under conditions of greater exploitation, had important political ramifications. It broke down the atomisation of home life, brought a changed social consciousness and gave women greater social agency. Women in paid work have the potential to challenge the artificial separation between work and home.

Today, maternity leave, the recognition to permanent part-time jobs, and some other rights have been won (albeit unevenly). Although the gender pay gap stubbornly remains, women workers, as a growing proportion of the working class, have also drawn issues of care work at home and reproductive rights into the social arena. While paid work for many women represents a gruelling routine, carried out on top work at home, the fact of going out to work and earning alters perceptions—about oneself and about issues that hitherto had been seen as private matters: pregnancy, abortion, relationships, control over one's life.

Recent movements by women across the world reflect as much. The victory scored by Argentina's Green Wave protests—which pushed the country's congress to legalise elective abortion until the

fourteenth week of pregnancy—and the protest movements in Mexico, Brazil and Chile against bans on abortion have all occurred at the end of a period in which the number of women working in these countries has substantially increased.⁵⁵

Before COVID, feminists' strikes against gender violence and for abortion rights impacted strongly in Spain and Poland. The feminist strike, argues Argentinian activist Veronica Gago, brings paid employment and home existence together. It escapes the siloing of domestic violence by connecting it to economic, labour, institutional and police violence.⁵⁶ The Me Too movement has forever changed the silence surrounding sexual assault and harassment at work. Even workers at Google (a non-unionised workplace) were able to stage a mass global walkout against sexual harassment and gender inequality in 2018, which involved over 20,000 workers in different countries. The Irish Repeal movement's determination break the hold of conservative Ireland sprang partly from the accumulated numbers of women in paid work. In capitalism, women's relationship to the waged sector of work both intensifies the double burden of paid work and unpaid work in the home and also becomes a potential source of collective power with which to change things.

The social movements since the Great Recession have brought to the fore how struggles against oppression can shake the whole of society. Movements against gender oppression can reverberate across workplaces and even trigger industrial action, as was the case with a limited numbers of strikes in the middle of a pandemic in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The movements for reproductive rights still have a long way to go, and have constantly to fight the conservative backlash against them. But the connection between these struggles and workplaces is key for securing radical change. The Irish Repeal movement, while a mass movement from below, also showed that without the ongoing involvement of broader working-class struggles, these movements can be steered by liberals into compromised solutions which do not fully deliver what was fought for. But the fact that the number of women in paid work has continued to rise, even during the pandemic, makes the argument about the strategic potential of

workplaces in relation to fighting gender oppression easier to make.

Alternatives to the Capitalist Home

As the numbers of women in paid work continue to increase, the social and political tensions between household social reproduction and production in capitalism become more acute. Capitalism today offers few alternatives to private households for the provision of care, because to do so would require a capital outlay that capitalism refuses to make. Such are the priorities of governments that money can be found for increased defence spending but not for raising children.

The full socialisation of community services, of child and elder care, is urgently needed. Twenty-four-hour creches were a live demand in the post-68 era; today, trade unions have settled for the weak demand of tax relief for childcare, which accepts that services are market based.

In Ireland, there have been mobilisations against the abysmal provision of childcare and the absence of full labour rights for creche workers. In February 2020, childcare providers and parents in the Early Years Alliance came out into the streets to demand better childcare services. A citizens assembly last year recommended a more publicly funded model and early and out-hours childcare. But the addition of the word 'affordable' reflected the degree to which market provision was still considered the dominant framework. The assembly's aims were very modest following the UNICEF target of an increase in childcare spending from the current 0.37 percent of GDP to 1 percent by no later than 2030. Things need to go much further. Childcare needs to be a community service based on a public-service model and available for all as a social right.

Meanwhile, ever more is being asked of homes. Governments are even drawing on individual homes to meet the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The generosity towards Ukrainian refugees has been impressive, but states should be providing accommodation—for refugees and everyone else—as a social right.



the choices in our personal lives that capitalism won't.

But at every turn, neoliberal states continue to turn a blind eye to the question of publicly funded services. Working from home has become the ideal capitalist solution—fix the childcare problem by getting people to carry out their paid jobs at home. Remote working, as Kitty Holland points out, is ‘mommy-tracked,’ that is, it’s taken up disproportionately by women with care responsibilities.⁵⁷ Women are more likely to seek flexible work options in the absence of proper, affordable childcare. Working from home may seem like an improvement on having to pay for expensive childcare, but in reality parents have no choice. State-funded, comprehensive community childcare is not on offer, and individual households are left to pick up the slack.

Homes form a vital part of our lives. Yet under capitalism they reflect everything that is wrong about class society. They are conditioned by the dictates of the market, forced to pick up the care that society won't, and can be oppressive places for women, especially for those without means or money to go and live somewhere else. Our society needs to prioritise alleviating the burden of care that individual homes and women are forced to carry.

Homes should be where we can foster relationships which are freely entered into and fashioned in the way we choose. We should not be forced into conforming to the gender-bound capitalist home driven by the profit motive. The relationship between social reproduction in the home and the capitalist system shows, above all else, the urgent need for systemic change, led by working women, to provide

- ¹ ‘Simple reproduction’ was the term Marx used, the title of a chapter in the first volume of *Capital*. See Karl Marx, 1976 *Capital Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books), 711–24.
- ² Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping class, recentring oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Aaron Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon: Work Power and Political Strategy* (London: Pluto, 2020); Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work, Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction* (London, Pluto Press, 2020).
- ³ Tithi Bhattacharya, *Women and Work*, 19. Nancy Fraser said that the Marxist economic understanding of capitalism should be extended and social reproduction seen as constituting ‘the background conditions’ of capitalism. Nancy Fraser, *Critical Sociology* 46:7–8 (2020) 1327–37.
- ⁴ Nancy Fraser, ‘Crisis of Care?’ In Bhattacharya (ed.), *Women and Work*, 22.
- ⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, maids, and sex-workers in the new economy* (London: Granta, 2020). Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When work becomes home, and home becomes work* (Metropolitan Books, 1997), 232.
- ⁶ European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions, ‘Domestic workers in Europe Getting Organised!’ available online at: www.effat.org
- ⁷ Jennifer O’Connell, *The Irish Times*, Oct 26, 2019, <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/eu-commission-measures-irelands-performance-on-childcare/>
- ⁸ European Institute for Gender Equality, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-report/informal-care-children-and-childcare-services>
- ⁹ Eurostat figures available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Households_by_type_and_presence_of_children_in_the_EU_in_2010_and_in_2020_\(in_millions\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Households_by_type_and_presence_of_children_in_the_EU_in_2010_and_in_2020_(in_millions).png)
- ¹⁰ These are 2017 figures from the UN, available online at: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/popfacts/PopFacts_2017-2.pdf
- ¹¹ Eurostat figures available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4187653/11581511/share-of-single-parents+with+children.jpg/1ac27ed2-4c80-2c3c-eb6b-06d1bb44225a?_t=1622531761489
- ¹² *One Family*, data from 2021, available online at: <https://onefamily.ie/media-policy/facts-figures/>
- ¹³ Office for National Statistics, ‘Families and Households in the UK,’ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2020>
- ¹⁴ For the demographic and social impact of medical and reproductive technologies see this UN report by Bahira Trask, ‘Mega Trends and Families: The Impact of Demographic Shifts, International Migration and Urbanization, Climate Change, and Technological Transformations’, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, (2020) 17–8, https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2020/06/UN.MegaTrends.Final_Trask_2020.pdf
- ¹⁵ ‘Factfinding: How many adults under thirty are still living at home with their parents,’ *The Journal* February 2020, <https://thejournal.ie/factfind-under-living-with-parents-4981426-Feb2020/>
- ¹⁶ Paul Cammack, ‘Marx on Social Reproduction,’ *Historical Materialism* 28:2 (2020), 1–31. Cammack highlights the recent changes to household composition, consumption and domestic labour, making the point that social reproduction must be understood as operating within the totality of capitalist relations. See also Martha Gimenez, *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist feminist essays* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).
- ¹⁷ This is the formulation that Terry Eagleton uses in ‘Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams.’ In *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Terry Eagleton, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 169.
- ¹⁸ Chris Harman, 1984 ‘Women’s Liberation and Revolutionary Socialism’ *International Socialism* 2 (23), 3–41.
- ¹⁹ Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women; Towards a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 144.
- ²⁰ Marx *Capital Vol 1*, 711. ‘
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 719.
- ²² Tithi Bhattacharya notes the difference between use values produced in the home and exchange values in commodity production, but then describes the two processes as ‘co-constitutive,’ which seems to dissolve the distinction. See Tithi Bhattacharya, ‘How Not to Skip Class: Social reproduction of labor and the Global Working Class,’ *International Viewpoint* October 31, 2015, <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/how-not-to-skip-class-social-reproduction-of-labor-and-the-global-working-class/>
- ²³ Marx, *Capital Vol 1*, 717
- ²⁴ Eleanor Burke Leacock, ‘Women’s Status in Egalitarian society: Implications for Social Evolution’ *Current Anthropology*, 19:2 (1978), 247–75.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ²⁶ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972),
- ²⁷ For an example of the nature of domestic work in Britain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries see Chris Middleton, ‘The sexual division of Labour in Feudal England,’ *New Left Review* 113:14 (1979), 147–68
- ²⁸ See Sheila Rowbothom’s account of the condition of women in pre-revolutionary Russia: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3202-women-in-russia-before-and-after-the-revolution>

- ²⁹ Goretti Horgan, 'Changing women's Lives in Ireland,' *International Socialism* 2:91 (2001),55. Illustration from <https://weavespindye.ie/2015/01/30/history-of-spinning-in-ireland/>
- ³⁰ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch; Women the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Automeia, 2014) 61–133.
- ³¹ Jodi Dean, 'Silvia Federici: The exploitation of women and the development of capitalism,' *Liberation School*, <https://www.liberationschool.org/silvia-federici-women-and-capitalism/>
- ³² For an account of women's work in the industrial revolution see Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women Work and Family* (London: Routledge), particularly Ch. 4, in which the authors deal with this in Britain and France.
- ³³ Silvia Federici, *The Patriarchy of the Wage Notes on Marx, Gender and Feminism* (Oakland CA: PM Press), 6.
- ³⁴ Angela Y. Davis, *Women Race and Class* (London: Penguin Modern Classics).
- ³⁵ Gary Becker, *The Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ³⁷ Jane Humphries, 'The Origin of the Family born out of scarcity not wealth,' in Janet Sayer, Mary Evans and Nanneke Redclift (eds.) *Engels Revisited: Feminist Essays* (Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 1987).
- ³⁸ Emil Edenborg, 'The global rise of family values,' *Utrikesmagasinet*, 27 June, 2019. Claire Provost, 'How the far right is weaponizing "the family,"' *The Face*, 17 April 2019, <https://theface.com/society/inside-the-far-right-family-movement>
- ³⁹ See Fratelli d'Italia, 'Fdi: Fidanza-Fitto, noi a difesa di vita e famiglia,' 24 June 2021, <https://ecr-fratelliditalia.eu/fdi-fidanza-fitto-noi-a-difesa-di-vita-e-famiglia/>; Georgia Meloni, 'The friendly face of Italy's surging far right,' *The Guardian*, 9 February, 2018.
- ⁴⁰ See Una Mullally on Senator Sharon Keoghan, who is homophobic and rails against surrogacy and who hailed Orban's victory as a triumph, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/una-mullally-what-should-we-do-when-senators-go-too-far-1.4860668>
- ⁴¹ Martha Gimenez, *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), see Ch. 11, 'Loving alienation: the contradictions of Domestic Work', 257–73.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 258
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 270.
- ⁴⁴ Dan Swain, 'Alienation, or why capitalism is bad for us' in Matt Vidal, Tony Smith, Tomás Rotta and Paul Pew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 363.
- ⁴⁵ See Jonathan Martineau, 'Culture in the Age of Acceleration, Hypermodernity, and Globalized Temporalities,' *Journal of Arts Management Law and Society* 47:4, 218–229.
- ⁴⁶ Gunilla Krantz and Claudia Garcia-Moreno, 'Violence against Women,' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 10:9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.022756>
- ⁴⁷ World Health Organisation, 9 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
- ⁴⁸ WHO report, 9 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
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- ⁵⁰ See <https://www.facebook.com/refugenow>
- ⁵¹ World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLE.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=EU>
Eurostat figures from 2018 show the gender gap in male and female participation rates narrowing from 15 percent in 2008 to 12 percent in 2018. Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200306-1>
- ⁵² These figures and the table below can be found at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200306-1>
- ⁵³ Eddie Conlon, 'The Irish Working Class', *Irish Marxist Review*, 32 (2022), 11–2, <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/447/431>
- ⁵⁴ Immigrant and migrant workers now make up around 17 percent of the Irish workforce: *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁵⁵ On average by 10 percent ; see UN figures from 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1050121#:~:text=More%20women%20are%20entering%20the,the%20United%20Nations%20on%20Monday>
- ⁵⁶ Veronica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London: Verso, 2020), 236.
- ⁵⁷ Kitty Holland 'Remote working could lead to new gender divide, stakeholders warn,' *Irish Times*, Jan 31, 2022.