

# The Careless Society: Holborow on Gender, Care and Homes in Modern Capitalism

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) characterised the spread of coronavirus (Covid-19) as a global pandemic. With no natural human immunity, the virus spread rapidly across the globe. Two weeks later, the Irish government announced the first of a series of stay-at-home orders, or lockdowns, as they came to be known. The first 120 day lockdown, the longest for any country in Europe, was followed by a further lockdown later that year, which extended into 2021. When the government finally declared the end of their pandemic measures, over 1.7 million cases had been officially confirmed and 9,366 people had died.<sup>1</sup> When compared to other countries, there were some positives in the Irish state's response to Covid. Although it could certainly have done more, the state at least attempted to prioritise health and safety, it provided economic support for people to stay at home and organised one of the most efficient and successful mass vaccination programmes in Europe. As schools and workplaces were forced to close, over 1 million people relied on the state for all or part of their income.

However, what quickly became evident was that it was not just a lack of physical immunity that put us at risk, it was our lack of social immunity – a result of over a decade of austerity and entrenched neoliberal policies – that made us particularly vulnerable. From our increasingly profit-driven health care system to our carceral approach to migration and social dislocation, the austerity-ravaged Irish state faced a full blown crisis of social reproduction with the emergence of Covid.

The loss of life was significant, especially among the elderly, the sick and other vulnerable groups. Those living, more often than not, in privatised, profit-driven residential care settings, accounted for 59 per cent of all Covid-19 deaths, with nursing homes alone, accounting for 50 per cent of deaths. Suddenly, the question of care, something that was rarely spoken about and usually understood as a vocational activity, was a vital political issue, if seldom framed as such.

In many ways, Covid-19 followed the same patterns of inequality that have always been embedded in our systems of care. We have known since the work of Rudolf Virchow, who studied typhus in Upper Silesia [modern Poland and the Czech Republic] in the mid-nineteenth century, and the revolutionary socialist Friedrich Engels, who studied the horrendous conditions of the English working class in the 1840s, that it is society that creates the conditions that make people sick, and that those who lack economic, social, and political power will typically shoulder the greatest weight of disease.<sup>2</sup> Yet today we also know that inequality is itself associated with poorer health outcomes, including increased levels of disease and lower life expectancies; in short, poor people get sick more often and die younger than those in the higher socio-economic groups.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Ireland is one of five OECD countries where people over 65 in the poorest 20 per cent of society are more than twice as likely to be living with poor health than their wealthier counterparts.<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the lifespan, the *Growing Up in Ireland* study shows that by the time children

are just 5 years old there is evidence of widening health inequality.<sup>5</sup> The impacts of Covid-19 were no different. But what the pandemic did do, was expose the often hidden nature of these forms of inequality and reveal the centrality of care in managing these outcomes.

### **Stay home - ‘stay safe’**

During the Covid-19 lockdowns we all became wearily familiar with the mantra “Stay Safe; Stay Home.” as it was endlessly repeated by politicians, journalists and public health officials. The implication was clear; ‘home’ was our refuge, our harbour of safety amid the storm of Covid-19. Social media was awash with wealthy and middle class people showing off their newly reorganised home offices, their expansive open-plan and tastefully decorated living spaces coupled with a spacious garden in which to enjoy the unprecedented warm weather experienced in Spring 2020. But the experience of staying safe and staying home was encountered very differently by other groups of people – people living in overcrowded and cramped rented accommodation, homeless families confined to a single hotel room, migrants in direct provision centres, prisoners, people living in institutions of care, women and children experiencing domestic violence – those who had no way to escape stressful and congested living spaces. Many of the politicians who supported lockdowns as the primary strategy for controlling the virus, had little comprehension of what it was like to be confined to a dark, cramped space or forced to inhabit a ‘home’ where your violent tormentor lived directly alongside you.

'Home' for these groups of people offered little safety and certainly no refuge.

It was this experience of 'home' under Covid-19 lockdown that prompted Marnie Holborow to write *Homes in Crisis Capitalism: Gender Work and Revolution* (2024); a book that explores the key roles of individual homes and the changes they experienced during and after the pandemic. Holborow's book is both timely and provocative, filled with analysis and insight. It poses important questions about the nature of what constitutes work, our understanding of 'home' and the role of gender oppression within contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Most importantly, Holborow situates gender and home within their essential relationships to capitalist modes of production. She argues that the pandemic exposed how homes, normally "hidden abodes left to themselves, suddenly came into public view" revealing the different class and race experiences of home life within a "social world of entrenched gender inequality and discrimination".<sup>6</sup> As everything shifted into the home, women "disproportionately bore the brunt of the newly configured" forms of social organisation, as they suddenly had to care, often single-handedly, without the support of family, social services or respite.

In many ways, Holborow's arguments about gender and care seem obvious, familiar especially in light of the experiences of the pandemic. And yet, they are far from it, and were virtually absent from all public discourse and the politics of government during Covid-19. Indeed, if you were to conduct a survey of news media over the

course of the pandemic you would be forgiven for thinking that the most pressing problem facing Irish society was whether or not pubs or restaurants could operate at full unrestricted capacity during a global pandemic. This topic consumed hours of public debate within the news media, in the Oireachtas and among public health officials. Yet, the real scandal of Covid-19 was not that you couldn't go to the pub for a pint without also paying for an over-priced portion of chips; rather it was the dual crises of home and care work that it exposed. With multiple aspects of daily life confined to the home space, the essential nature of unpaid labour, the majority of which is performed by women, was thrown into sharp relief. Yet, women's experiences were, at best, forced to the margins of the public debate and, at worst, rendered completely invisible. Certainly Covid-19 disproportionately affected the lives of working class people in general, but it was women who found themselves at the coalface.

Research conducted during the pandemic by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that the pandemic had a "disproportionate impact" on women and that it was undoing many of the gains of workplace equality achieved in recent decades and exacerbating disparities. Their own words are clear - "Previous crises have shown that when women lose their jobs, their engagement in unpaid care work increases and when jobs are scarce, women are often denied job opportunities available to men".<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it found that women's jobs were 1.8 times more vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis than men's, with women

accounting for 54 percent of overall job losses though they account for just 39 percent of global employment.<sup>8</sup> In Ireland, women exited the workforce at a faster rate than men and carried a heavier share of the unpaid care and domestic work. According to research by UN Women before Covid-19 hit, women on average spend six more hours than men on unpaid childcare every week. A survey of nearly 1500 women by the National Women's Council in May 2020, revealed that some 85 percent of women believed their caring responsibilities had increased dramatically since the onset of the pandemic, suggesting they were unfairly shouldering the burden of unpaid work.<sup>9</sup> This is confirmed in recently published research by the ESRI which shows that since COVID-19, women spend an average of 7.7 more hours per week on unpaid childcare than men - this 'second shift' equates to 31.5 hours per month; almost an extra week of full-time employment.<sup>10</sup>

So, for the majority of women the idea of 'home' was far from a sentimentalised, comfortable haven. It is true that if you ask women what 'home' represents to them, many will use words like comfort, safety, love and the majority may well consider their home and family to be centrally important in their lives. This is hardly surprising. Home can be the one place where we can expect and receive unconditional love and support, functioning for some as a haven from an often brutal and violent world. But this understanding of 'home' is not a universal experience; home is experienced differently by different people in terms of structure, space and function. Much

of how you experience home will depend on your class position, as under neoliberal capitalism, a home has become an expensive commodity; an investment or source of profit if you are rich, a source of exploitation or exclusion if you are poor. Furthermore, for a significant number of people their experience of home is a nightmare of violence and fear. Another notable, and now quickly forgotten, feature of the COVID-19 lockdowns was the horrifying global surge in domestic violence. It was so pronounced across the globe that the United Nations referred to it in 2020 as 'The Shadow Pandemic', revealing something important about the nature of the home under capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

Domestic violence accounts for a significant portion of recorded violent crime in Ireland and the most common scene of murder is the home. In 2022, 12 women died in violent circumstances in Ireland, making it the worst year in a decade for violence against women. Between 1996 and April 2023, a total of 258 women died violently in Ireland. The statistics show that 165 of these women had been killed in their own homes.<sup>12</sup> Women who are raped are more likely to be attacked by someone they know – often within the home. In Ireland, one in every six women over the age of 15 have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner.<sup>13</sup> The physical and sexual abuse of children is also more likely to happen inside the home than outside. None of this should be particularly surprising, as the home is an institution based on hierarchical relationships and sexual repression. The home, as noted above, promises happiness and safety, but

frequently delivers insecurity and sadness. While it can sometimes function as a haven from the cruelty of the outside world, it cannot be a genuinely secure retreat. Pressures on the family, particularly working class families, from unpaid bills to unemployment, from problems of parents working shifts to difficult relationships, all impinge upon it and have been exacerbated in recent years by neoliberalism.

Holborow excels at unpacking this contradictory experience of home and family in the context of contemporary capitalism. To achieve this, she seizes on the concept of ‘home’ itself as a framing device for her argument, rejecting the traditional term ‘families’ utilised by the classical Marxist tradition. Holborow writes “I have chosen to use homes rather than families, using homes in a broader sense: the individual units where people live, but also invoking the work, activities and relationships within them.” For Holborow, homes fit better for a number of reasons. Firstly, as a result of the experiences of the Covid lockdowns societies have developed a more nuanced understanding of the work that happens at home. Secondly, the traditional category ‘family’ has ceased to be the most accurate description of how people organise their lives today, at least in the Global North. The traditional concept of the family, based on the heteronormative man and woman married with children, is dramatically declining. As Holborow notes, across the EU, the proportion of single adult households is increasing faster than those of adults living as a couple. Therefore, she concludes, using the concept of home allows us to conceptualise varied living

arrangements including single-person households, pensioners, young people renting and sharing together, “as well as those families with children a parent, or parents, of different, trans or the same gender”. Finally, as Holborow notes, the word family has become a rather loaded term ideologically. Conservatives have long loved to use the term as a way of resisting the progressive changes championed by feminist and LGBTQI+ activists. For the far right, family values have become an effective way of signalling opposition to abortion, divorce and queer liberation and a coded way of prioritising the white European family, while opposing migration and multiculturalism.

### **Marx on Social Reproduction**

To further elucidate this idea of home, Holborow frames her analysis in terms of a Marxist understanding of the relationship between oppression and exploitation. Firstly, she looks at the origins of gender oppression, situating it as a historical, rather than a natural or inevitable, experience, rooted in the rise of class societies. The opening chapter of the book includes a well-argued defence of Engels and the Marxist tradition’s understanding of the origins of women’s oppression as outlined in Engels’ 1884 text, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Holborow rehabilitates Engels work, which has long been misrepresented, distorted and marginalised by multiple feminist traditions, including Marxist feminists, although she is also willing to criticise and revise aspects of his work, particularly in terms of the developments around the concept of social reproduction.

Holborow then proceeds to explore the concept of social reproduction which she defines as a series of systems through which health, education and care are provided by the state, society and individuals within their homes. Social reproduction theory has moved from the margins of feminist theory to become one of the key concepts deployed by a range of feminist thinkers seeking to explain the gendered nature of oppression within contemporary capitalism. So ubiquitous is the term, within academia at least, that it is often employed as a shorthand for discussing the ongoing existence and renewal of inequality (see, for example, the Wikipedia entry for Social Reproduction Theory).

When used in this manner, Susan Ferguson notes, it often functions as a description, rather than an explanation or an analysis of the nature of capitalist relations and the labour involved in renewing them, or, more importantly, resisting them.<sup>14</sup> However, when employed in its original and Marxist sense – as first invoked by Marx in *Capital* (1867), and later developed and expanded by a range of Marxist feminist thinkers, most notably Lisa Vogel – it offers a way of understanding the contradictory relationship between production and reproduction under capitalism.<sup>15</sup> In other words, social reproduction can offer us an understanding of how the ‘production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process’ and, at its best, it can deepen our understanding of everyday life under capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Social reproduction is a loose but nonetheless broadly coherent school of thought – one that identified and

developed the political economic insight that the social labour involved in producing this and the next generation of workers sits in a necessary but contradictory relation to the capitalist drive to produce and accumulate surplus value.

Holborow’s theorisation of social reproduction theory as a framework that explores and explains the relationship between oppression and exploitation, allows us to understand the functioning of systems of privatised care under capitalism. Unlike other Marxist feminists, such as Martha Gimenez, Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya, who position social reproduction as a key component of the economic core of capitalism, Holborow, drawing on Engels, locates social reproduction within the superstructure of capitalism. She writes: “Situating social reproduction as part of the superstructure takes into account the constantly changing character of the different components of social reproduction – not only the people care that takes place in the home, but also health, education and welfare systems”. As the crisis of capitalism intensifies and the privatisation of all forms of care becomes more entrenched, working class households find their living standards squeezed. Capitalism is unwilling to offer even modest improvements in modern care systems creating a serious dilemma: on the one hand, capitalism needs the unpaid care work done in the home for free, but, on the other hand, it needs more cheap female wage-labour, with one undermining the other.

Addressing this dilemma is where Holborow's book excels. There are significant Marxist feminist contributions that explore and explain this fundamental dilemma at the core of contemporary capitalism. For example, in their manifesto for 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism, *Feminism for the 99%*, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser point towards the catastrophic effects that neoliberal privatisation and the deregulation of welfare and care services have had on individual families: "In some cases," they argue, "it has marketized public services, turning them into direct profit streams: in others, it has shunted them back to individual families, forcing them – and especially the women within them – to bear the entire burden of care."<sup>17</sup> But as Holborow notes, while the manifesto is "incisive on political vision", it falls short on delivering "precise political strategies".

It is Holborow's ability to strategise politically that makes *Homes in Crisis Capitalism* a standout book, offering the reader more than just analysis and explanation, important and all as these are. The book concludes with a range of political strategies for dealing with the many practical issues that arise from her analysis and makes a compelling and urgent case for a different conception of care and 'home' as part of an alternative vision of society that puts the needs of the most marginalised and vulnerable at its core. This type of analysis is sadly absent from much of mainstream feminism theory. Under neoliberalism, the class and race dimensions of women's oppression are disguised, and everything is reduced to a question of 'individual choice',

as if women's oppression was simply the result of poor choices, and not material provision or wealth distribution.

Holborow is not interested in simply equalising social reproduction and production; rather she insists that "the capitalist mode of production shapes all social institutions, including social reproduction". As a result, she is also highly critical of what she terms the "social democratic welfare statism" of the social democratic left that seek a return to welfare states of the twentieth century post-war period, arguing that "the crisis of capitalism has become so acute as to make investment on a scale necessary to reboot the welfare state unlikely".

Holborow points us in a different direction, taking inspiration from the explosion of women-led activism that has characterised politics around the globe, from the enormous women's marches against the misogyny of far right governments such as Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil to the 'Women Life Freedom' marches in Iran. Indeed, women's movements against gender violence, wage inequality, reproductive rights, as well as movements for sexual and gender identity freedom have engulfed every continent. The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has also seen mobilisations calling on states to provide better social and community based multigenerational care services.

Holborow is careful not to counterpose different forms of struggle, arguing that working-class resistance should not be seen as separate from workplace movements and

vice-versa. She cites the example of Argentina between 2018 and 2020 where a successful movement around abortion rights brought together different aspects of women's work in the home, the community and the workplace through the idea of a women's strike. The movement emphasised the importance of solidarity, broadening its initial demands around abortion to include wider demands such as the right of women and trans people to live a life free of violence, the right to equal pay at work and the provision of decent welfare services.

As the crisis of capitalism intensifies, the overlap between the economic and political intensifies and so opportunities to organise on multiple fronts will only increase, and, Holborow argues, socialists will have the opportunity to engage on multiple terrains, the street, the community, the workplace and the ballot box. However, and this is the important point upon which Holborow concludes, in order to maintain the momentum of progressive political movements and crucially, to prevent them from being co-opted into mainstream politics (like, for example, the Repeal Movement in Ireland), the question of political representation must be addressed.

But Marxist feminism texts and movements have been remarkably reluctant to address this question. Making a case for a connection between radical social movements and radical party politics, Holborow turns to the important insights of Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci argued that mass movements are unstable and subject to contradictory consciousness which, if not addressed, can lead to a state of 'anxious defence'. In this context a revolutionary party can offer a two-way process between 'spontaneity and leadership' and offer an important way of navigating the path to a new social order. Building a radical political movement alongside a radical political party may not be easy, but Holborow concludes it is vital and is something that progressive of all stripes can no longer afford to leave unaddressed. Given the uncertain times that we live in, failure will become increasingly dangerous, because it not just the cozy consensus of the centre that awaits us, but an increasingly emboldened, fascist far-right.



<sup>1</sup>Ireland's COVID-19 Data Hub. *Government of Ireland Gov.ie*. Department of Health (Ireland) @ <https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com>.

<sup>2</sup>Amy Kapczynski and Gregg Gonsalves. 2020. Alone Against the Virus. *Boston Review*. 13 March @ <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/amy-kapczynski-corona-time/>.

<sup>3</sup>Norman Daniels, Bruce Kennedy & Ichiro Kawachi 2000. Social Justice Is Good for Our Health. *Boston Review*. 25 July @ <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/norman-daniels-bruce-kennedy-ichiro-kawachi-justice-good-our-health>.

<sup>4</sup>Social Justice Ireland 2023. Poverty, Health and Life. 17 July 20 @ [https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/poverty-health-and-life-expectancy#\\_ftn5](https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/poverty-health-and-life-expectancy#_ftn5).

<sup>5</sup>Growing Up in Ireland Study Team. 2023. Growing Up in Ireland: Well-being, Play and Diet among Five-Year-Olds. ESRI & TCD @ <https://www.esri.ie/publications/growing-up-in-ireland-well-being-play-and-diet-among-five-year-olds>.

<sup>6</sup>All references unless otherwise stated are to Marnie Holborow, *Homes in Crisis Capitalism: Gender, Work and Revolution*. Bloomsbury 2023.

<sup>7</sup>International Labour Organization. 2021. *Building Forward Fairer: Women's rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery* @ [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_814499.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_814499.pdf).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>National Women's Council. 2020. Women's Experiences of Caring during Covid-19 @ [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/FINAL\\_Womens\\_Experience\\_of\\_Caring\\_During\\_COVID19\\_Survey\\_Report.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/FINAL_Womens_Experience_of_Caring_During_COVID19_Survey_Report.pdf)

<sup>10</sup>Paul Redmond, Klavs Cipriakis, Adele Whelan and Seamus McGuinness. 2023. Gender equality and work-life balance policies during and after the COVID-19 crisis: thematic review @ <https://doi.org/10.2767/50106>.

<sup>11</sup>United Nations Women. 2021. *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>.

<sup>12</sup>Women's Aid. Femicide Watch. 2023. (Updated 11 October @ <https://www.womensaid.ie/app/uploads/2023/10/Womens-Aid-Femicide-Watch-1996-2023.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>Shauna Bowers. 2023. More than half of women have experienced sexual violence during lifetime. *Irish Times*. 19 April @ <https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2023/04/19/more-than-half-of-women-have-experienced-sexual-violence-during-lifetime-cso/>

<sup>14</sup>Susan Ferguson. 2022. *Social Reproduction Theory: What's the Big Idea?* London. Pluto Press. <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/>

<sup>15</sup>Other important contributors from within the Marxist feminist tradition include Meg Luxton, Pat and Hugh Armstrong, Wally Seccombe, Johanna Brenner, Barbara Laslett, Silvia Federici and Maria Mies.

<sup>16</sup>Meg Luxton. 2018. The production of life itself: gender, social reproduction and International Political Economy. In *Handbook on the International Political Economy of Gender*. Edward Elgar Publishing @ <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783478842.00008>

<sup>17</sup>Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Battacharya, Nancy Fraser. 2019. *Feminism for the 99%*. London: Verso.