

Women and Austerity

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The position of women in Irish society in 2012 is in a very contradictory place. Double the amount of Irish women are working compared to only a generation before and the attendance of women in higher education exceeds that of men. And yet, in the Irish recession, conservative ideas about women are resurfacing and, courtesy of a Labour Minister for Social Protection, working class women are being scapegoated as feckless 'unmarried mothers' who cost the state too much. As in the recession of the 1930's, working class women are bearing the brunt of all the injustice meted out by the capitalist class. Then laws were introduced to exclude women from work; today women are told to get off social welfare and deal with childcare on lower and lower wages.

In the space of a generation, it is true, women's lives have changed immensely. The gains won by the women, are there today for all to see. 57% of all third level graduates in Ireland are now women. The employment rate for women in the 18 to 44 age group is over 60%. The highest office in the land, the President, was held by women for the last 20 years while a small number of women have begun to occupy prominent positions in the media and in business⁶⁹. In a country where female public servants up to forty years ago had to resign on marriage and maternity leave was a mere four weeks 'sick leave', society's vision of women and their role has altered significantly.

However despite this welcome and undeniable progress serious issues remain for women. 2009 figures (the most recently analysed) show that a very significant gender pay gap continues to exist: Average earnings for men that year were €47,178 while for women it was €33,932. In other words, women's earnings were just 72% of men's. This not only reflects a gap in the hourly rate of pay for men and women but also the fact that women are more likely to have to take up part time employment due to family responsibilities.(CSO, National Employment Survey 2009, Government Publications Office)

Women's progress throughout their careers to senior positions in their work has been limited. In the civil service, for example, where 65% of employees are women, less than one sixth of secretary general, deputy secretary general and assistant secretary general positions are occupied by women. This is reflected across the workforce and has been referred to as the "glass ceiling" effect.

This ceiling is also evident in the political system. Ireland has one of the worst gender balances of any parliament in the democratic world. The 25 women TDs constitute just 15% of the total. Since the foundation of the state a mere 91 female TDs have been elected⁷⁰.

Despite changes in the structure of families and households over the last twenty years, women remain the primary carers in society. Research by the National Women's Council found that women were responsible for 86% of child supervision over the course of a week, while 82% of care to adults was also provided by women.(National Women's Council of Ireland, 2009, "Who Cares? Challenging the Myth of Gender and Childcare")

The absence of affordable childcare has been an ongoing barrier to women's participation in the workforce. According to the OECD (2010, Gender Brief) families in Ireland pay up to 29% of their total income on childcare costs. This contrasts with countries like Germany and France where state provided services mean that this figure drops to as little as 8% and 11% respectively.

While legal advances have meant that women enjoy formal equality, it is clear that in reality there are many barriers to women's full participation as equals in society. Sexism is still rampant, and an almost pornographic culture has normalised images of and attitudes to women that centre on appearance and negative stereotypes. One very clear legacy of the Celtic Tiger is the widening class divide between women. Women from some backgrounds have the money, power and influence to ensure that they can buy the services for the home and family that ameliorate the burden of oppression. So while they are not immune to the generalised attitudes of society to women, they have very little in common with the daily lives of most women

⁶⁹Lynch, Kathleen, 2010, *Women, Class and Gender: New Discriminations* address to 22nd Greaves School

⁷⁰McGing, Claire, 2011, PoliticalReform.ie, *Women in Irish politics: Why so few and are quotas the answer?*

Austerity and the attack on working class women

Austerity has devastated lives across the board, but many of the most vicious cuts have been to services and benefits that women disproportionately rely on, thus ensuring that they bear the brunt of the recession.

Women have become the main targets of the war on welfare instigated by the Labour Party Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, in a disgraceful attempt to deflect blame away from those really responsible - the banks, the developers, the capitalist class and system as a whole - and focus people's minds on the necessity of slashing public spending. The media has been full of references to the excesses of social welfare fraud and double payments. A general atmosphere of scapegoating and subtle allegation has created a climate where a picture of a greedy conniving dole cheat raking in hundreds of thousands to fund her "welfare queen" existence is fed to the public.

This attack on working class women reveals the degree to which the class divide is alive and well in Ireland, ironically brought to the fore by the Labour Party and their zeal to back up the austerity programme.

Of course, the reality of life as a lone parent, 93% of whom are women could not be further from this picture. 65% of the country's poorest children live in one parent families. 35.5% of people living in lone parent families are 'at risk of poverty' while 17% of people were in consistent poverty in 2009. Lone parents are the group in society with the lowest level of income⁷¹.

Yet, successive budget have curtailed the payments and services that lone parent families rely on. A study of last year's budget by TASC, the independent think tank, found that those parenting alone were the most negatively impacted, losing 5% of their annual income. This year's Budget has made things even worse. The cuts in fuel allowance, Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowance, the additional payment towards rent supplement and the increase in VAT, school transport and fuel costs will push these families deeper into poverty.

In addition a number of very targeted measures will further restrict women's already limited chances to enter work and/or training.. Community Employment schemes, first introduced in 1997, provided a pathway for many women, and particularly lone parents, to engage in training and the workforce. This Budget has seen a move to cut the pay of workers on these schemes- all participants will lose €29.80 per child per week while new applicants will not be able to retain their One Parent Family Payment (OPFP) and payment for their work on the scheme.

Meanwhile, the upper age limit of the youngest child for new claimants of OPFP has been lowered from 14 to 12. On a phased basis this will be further reduced to 7 years old in 2014. In other words, from 2014 a lone parent will be expected to enter the workforce when their youngest child hits seven. This is in a country where not only do jobs not exist at present, but the chances of getting suitable affordable afterschool childcare is extremely limited. What subsidised childcare does exist, mainly in disadvantaged areas, has in fact seen its funding cut in 2012. FAS and VEC trainees, for example, are now required to make a €25 weekly contribution for Childcare Education and Training Support. In addition the income disregard for all social welfare recipients has been lowered meaning that less money can be earned before it starts to effect the level of social welfare payment.

All of this makes participation in work, whether in community employment or other types, and education/training more difficult and costly. It has the potential effect of isolating women and pushing them and their children deeper into poverty

In fact one of the most striking effects of the economic crisis so far has been the fall in female participation rates in the labour force. According to the CSO last year the female employment rate was 56%, which falls below the EU target of 60%. In 2001 and 2008 Ireland was actually ahead of the target. The gender pay gap mentioned above has begun to widen, having fallen during the boom years⁷².

The changes to pensions, particularly in the public sector, will hit women workers the hardest. Calculating pension entitlement on the basis of 'career average earnings' will mean that women will be penalised for the periods spent outside the workforce and for the more limited promotional opportunities available to them. The Older Women Workers' Access to Pensions study, recently published by the Centre for Aging Research and Development in Ireland, found that women were already at greater risk of poverty in old age than men

⁷¹TASC, *Winners and Losers? Equality Lessons for Budget 2012*

⁷²CSO, *Women and Men in Ireland 2011*

due to the fact that many have no occupational pension and among those who do, many have lower pensions than their male counterparts⁷³.

Women filling in for society

The cuts to public services and spending over the last four years have had a disproportionate effect on women. This relates to their role as society's carers. Women are expected to pick up the pieces when the state decides to abdicate responsibility for services for children, the sick, the elderly and those with special needs.

Unpaid women's work becomes central. Women look after elderly parents saving the state the cost of nursing home care, and grandmothers are enrolled for child minding duties. Within the health services, bed closures and huge reductions in front line staff have been accompanied by a shift towards "care in the community". With public health nurses not being replaced and home help hours being cut for patients, family members in the home, particularly women, pick up the pieces.

Cuts in funding to organisations that provide services to women who have experienced rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse as well as the cuts to maternity services are all putting women's physical and mental health in danger. The cut to the National Women's Council's funding will further weaken the state's commitment (sometimes mere lip service) to women's equality.

All of this is the product of austerity and the policies of the Troika that are so enthusiastically implemented by government. It should come as no surprise that women have been on the front line of the suffering. The IMF- inspired structural adjustment programmes that brought neo-liberal austerity to the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s pushed the cause of women back decades in those countries. Denied access to public education, health care and basic social services many women even paid with their lives as maternal deaths soared in some African countries.

These neoliberal policies show how much class is the decisive factor in the position of women in society. People often refer loosely to the idea that it is patriarchal system - a society dominated by men - that keeps women in thrall. One of the bitterest lessons of this recession is that it is class that determines, as a woman, how much equality you have. Yet the media continues to talk of women's roles from the viewpoint of far better-off women. 'The Irish Times' ran an article on October 22nd last year, for example, about the difficulty of juggling work and childcare entitled 'I don't know how she does it', after a Sarah Jessica Parker film of the same name. The paper, without the slightest hint of irony, saw fit to interview a Marketing Director, a Tax Director at Price Waterhouse Cooper, a Project Manager at Intel Ireland and the Managing Director of a PR firm as examples of the difficulties working mothers face. The dilemma of affording childcare simply did not figure. This kind of article is not untypical. There has effectively been a veil of silence in the media over the way the recession is affecting working class women.

The family and modern capitalism

Women are not destined by virtue of human nature or some biological determinism to be the carers in our society. This role has been very carefully constructed in modern capitalism and is very much centred around the family.

The family in its contemporary form is a relatively modern phenomenon. In hunter gatherer and early agricultural societies there tended to be flexible and loose pairing⁷⁴. The male-dominated family based, at least in theory, on monogamy, emerged with the division of society into classes and the development of private property around 5000 years ago and became a means of ensuring the transfer of wealth from one generation to the next through the male line⁷⁵. Since then the family has taken many different forms (polygamy, polyandry, extended families and so on) in different societies. The modern nuclear family is a product of the development of capitalism in the last few centuries.

⁷³See www.cardi.ie

⁷⁴Chris Harman, *Engels and the origins of human society*, International Socialism 65 p.133.

⁷⁵See above p.126-32

Under capitalism, the family, based in the notion of romantic love, but primarily an economic unit, plays a crucial role. In the overriding search for profit, no full social responsibility is taken for those who are not working and not providing profit. The family then becomes the place where the next generation of workers are fed, clothed, loved, care for and socialised, and where the older generation are cared for, at the least possible cost to the state.

Today women work outside the home. However work within the family is still as vital to the system as ever, and becomes even more so when recession hits. It means that women today face a double burden of working and "domestic duties".

The family is ideologically supported throughout the system as a result and it is the bedrock for the ideas about women that permeate society.

Struggle

The struggle for women's rights has been very much off the agenda in recent years. The idea that the fight for equality has been won was promoted in academia, in popular culture and in the media. Women's final step to full liberation became centred on a consumer based acquisition of expensive products, organising a dream wedding or staying fit with pole dancing classes.

With the brunt of recession resting on the backs of working class women however, the myth of liberation is increasingly exposed. Nowhere can we see this more clearly than 20 years on from the X case when a fourteen year old girl was denied an abortion in Ireland we still have absolutely no right to abortion in any circumstances. Even now the Fine Gael-Labour government are dancing around the issue and refusing to enact legislation to provide for abortion. Today more than ever it is becoming evident that the fight to end the oppression that women suffer is linked very much to changing the nature of the system we live under.

Capitalism in its boom time did not realise real equality for women and now in recession it is seizing back some of what was won. The madness of the financial system as evidenced in the last 10 years was not an aberration, but a reflection of capitalism and how it operates. Women have every interest in joining the struggle for an alternative economic order. And it is as workers and young people, male and female, move into struggle, that all sorts of ideas and prejudices will be challenged.

Ultimately a future where the resources of society would be harnessed to meet the needs of all would ensure that not just individual families, and women, but society as a whole would take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick and the vulnerable.

The new Irish female workforce has shown that it can lead the fight on defending women workers rights.

Women workers in La Senza, inspired by the Vita Cortex workers in Cork, recently had a successful occupation of a Dublin store. Lone parents have got organised through the SPARK campaign and are resisting the attacks on their rights contained in Budget 2012. The seeds of a fight by women against the system are there, that fight needs to blossom and grow into an Irish Spring.