**Still left holding the baby: women’s oppression and the corona crisis**

There are sometimes very great events and upheavals which not only present challenges in themselves, but which also throw into relief the wider inequalities and fault lines in society. The coronavirus crisis is one such upheaval which has posed questions about how we live and work, how we care for those unable to do so for themselves, how we protect the wider health of society. It makes us consider the way in which society is organised from housing to education to the nature of the family itself. It highlights divisions of class, race and gender in a stark way.

Those already at a disadvantage in ‘normal times’ find themselves at a much greater disadvantage now. This is very obvious in the case of women. There are many signs that women are particularly suffering as a result of the crisis and the lockdown. Reasons for this range from the dangers from domestic violence, the problems of stress and mental illness, the difficulties faced with prolonged periods in overcrowded or unsuitable accommodation, the many challenges of childcare in these circumstances. An estimated 4.5 million people have become unpaid carers for relatives as a result of the coronavirus, including 2.7 million women (Carers Week 2020).

All these potential problems are combined with major changes in work: women are heavily represented in those occupations which have lost jobs or been furloughed since March, such as retail and hospitality, and many of those in work are faced with often unfamiliar and isolated ways of working from home. There are, of course, very different working conditions for different groups of women. Large numbers of people have been working from home, including many office workers, university lecturers and admin staff, finance staff, civil servants and local government workers. These include considerable cohorts of managerial and professional grades, who generally find it easier. Those unable to work from home tend to be among the lowest paid, with senior executives being among the most able to do so (Thomas 2020). The pressures of working from home vary but for those with children it is particularly onerous, and there are numerous indications of women being in the most difficult positions, taking on the bulk of childcare and other domestic work, and having to do much of their paid work in the hours when their children are asleep.

One study which surveyed people in opposite-gender two parent families during lockdown found that there are major discrepancies in who does what. When looking at those who are doing paid work at home, mothers are more likely than fathers to be spending working hours also trying to care for children; they are also more likely to have left paid work or seen their paid hours of work reduced. They are much more likely to be interrupted by childcare during work: in lockdown they are doing only a third of uninterrupted paid work of fathers. (Andrew, 2020)

A survey carried out by IPSOS Mori along with Kings College London showed that both parents felt that they faced increased domestic responsibilities, but women spent far longer on childcare. At the same time men found it harder than women to deal with these responsibilities as well as paid work, suggesting that they were less accustomed to doing so.

‘While women (33%) and men (31%) are equally likely to say their caring and domestic responsibilities have increased since lockdown, female parents say they spend seven hours in an average weekday on childcare, compared with five hours for male parents.

Despite this, 43% of working fathers say their caring or domestic responsibilities are negatively impacting their ability to do their paid job by at least a fair amount, versus 32% of working mothers who say the same.’ (Global Institute 2020)

A report on pregnancy from the TUC, shows high levels of discrimination

over pregnancy and maternity; a flouting of health and safety law and putting women’s lives at risk; a lack of childcare for those returning from maternity leave; and a lack of adequate protection for those on zero-hours contracts. (TUC 2020b) A full 70 per cent who do not qualify for statutory sick pay because they earn too little are women (TUC 2020a).

Women are more likely to take time off for children’s illness and events such as sports days than men. A survey by the insurance firm AIG showed women are nearly three times more likely than men to take short or longer periods off work to care for children. (Muller-Heyndyk 2019) If the default position in working households is that women are left to do the bulk of childcare in ‘normal’ situations, it is hardly surprising during emergency situations when the family can no longer rely on outside services, the same dynamic might apply.

To many women in work, however, they may find themselves in still more difficult situations. Those working from home retain their salaries and often find their day to day costs reduced (commuting and the other costs of going to work). Those on the frontline – in the NHS but also working as cleaners, shopworkers, catering workers, and in care homes, have had to continue working but often in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions. They too have to grapple with increased domestic duties. The huge increase in women’s work at home, because of longer times shopping, home cooking from scratch with few takeaways or restaurants open, closure of nurseries, and the greater proportion of domestic labour because the family is at home much more, all put a further burden on those women who also work outside the home.

Many employees in badly affected areas where job losses are threatened are women – in retail, catering and hospitality industries. They are already very often in conditions of low pay and precarious employment, with zero hours contracts. Those who suffer loss of earnings through furlough, or who become dependent on benefit, and are not entitled to redundancy pay are more likely to be female and relatively low earners.

In addition many of these women are from BAME backgrounds and the indications are, according to a Fawcett Society report on the current crisis that:

‘BAME people working from home are more likely to say they are working more than prior to lockdown, with 4 in 10 (41% women and 40% men) agreeing compared with 3 in 10 white people (29% women, 29% men). Nearly half of BAME women (45%) say they are struggling to cope with the demands on their time, compared with 35% of white women and 30% of white men.’

This reflects the way in which the crisis helps illuminate existing inequalities.

If, as these examples suggest, the bulk of domestic labour falls onto women, the question which needs answering is why? The reasons for these figures are myriad but in large part lie in the nature of women’s role at work and in the home, and the way in which this helps structure inequality.

Under neoliberal capitalism women are fully part of the paid workforce but their role in unpaid domestic work is also considerably more than that of men. Recent figures showed women did 60% more unpaid work than men, and more than double the childcare, housework and cooking (ONS 2016). Women’s role in social reproduction and domestic labour is rooted in the family, and now that the family has become -albeit temporarily – the site of work, education and leisure, the pressures on women have become immense. Women’s oppression, the systematic disadvantaging of women because of their sex, is also rooted in the family, and it is therefore the site of increased challenges facing women.

One of the great developments of late capitalism has been the drawing in of women into the workforce. Once considered a ‘reserve army of labour’, to be brought in at times of labour shortage and to leave the labour market in times of unemployment, women, and crucially working mothers, have been a permanent part of the workforce for the past decades. This has reflected the needs of capital to utilise their labour power in a range of different occupations and at different levels of the labour market.

This has in turn led to major changes in the costs of reproduction of the family. These costs now require the wages of two adults to survive at all comfortably, to pay the very high price of housing and transport to work, childcare, food, clothing and the occasional holiday. Women’s work has become essential both to the maintenance of adequate standards of living for working class people, and to many professions and industries which depend on female labour – and on paying women less than men in equivalent work.

All this has taken place at a time when women’s entry into social production has not been matched by an equivalent emphasis on the onerous costs of social *reproduction*. This is still carried out largely within the privatised family and is carried out as unpaid labour (usually) by family members, of whom women do the majority share. As women have gone outside the home to work on a greater scale, so some of the functions of the family have become commodified, where family members pay for goods or machinery which can provide services once carried out by women in the home or can ease the burdens of housework to some extent. (German 2018)

So families with both adults working, especially those with children, have tended to pay for services such as childcare, takeaway or restaurant meals, ready prepared food, laundry and ironing services, as well as dishwashers or washing machines. For those in the higher income brackets, these services will extend to paying others outside the family to clean their houses, walk the dogs, and home tutor their children.

This outsourcing of the functions of the family depends on an army of low paid labour which is highly feminised, in many instances comprised of migrant labour. The growth of low wage insecure jobs has characterised recent decades of neo liberalism. Many of these jobs are involved in roles of social reproduction, caring for children, the sick and elderly, preparing and delivery of food, cleaning and catering (Bhattacharya 2017). The labour supply for these jobs depend on lengthy international supply chains which in turn depend on cheap labour, often by migrants, and a degree of insecurity both about jobs and status (Hochschild 2014).

The situation has long been untenable, as various roles previously carried out unpaid in the family are now available on the market but in highly unequal conditions. These jobs and services are noted for low pay and precarity. The ability of mainly higher paid professionals to take advantage of the low wage economy in employing other women to carry out some of their domestic tasks was already, pre Covid, based on a society with high levels of inequality. Suddenly as the whole system grinds to a halt, we begin to see the flaws in this system and recognise that where women are when the music stops are having to cope with even greater burdens.

We have seen a long-term breakdown in the male breadwinner family and its replacement by a dual income family. This has changed the division of labour within the family, but when that includes full time workers buying goods, services and labour to substitute for what would otherwise be unpaid domestic labour carried out within the household, it is likely to be dependent on levels of stability of income and employment. When that changes, for whatever reason, the traditional roles begin to reassert themselves.

The coronavirus crisis has therefore highlighted the levels of labour involved in social reproduction, and how dependent these have been on women’s work, whether paid or unpaid. When we discuss the idea that we should not have to return to the old normal, we should challenge the present model of social reproduction, which depends on the privatised family, augmented by usually low paid, very often female and migrant, labour to perform essential cleaning and caring tasks.

It is no wonder that the model is broken and that this crisis has caused so much difficulty for so many women. While the mantra of women being able to have it all has been very seductive, the reality is a long hours, intense, often low wage, exploitative economy, with many women struggling to work and care for their own families. While women have long seen paid work as part of their emancipation from the confines of home, the crisis has shown us that there is no real escape. That has to change.

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