

2018: Is the invisible woman still a phenomenon in Irish society today?

The invisible woman is undoubtedly still a prevalent phenomenon in Irish society today, despite improvements and steps towards gender equality. In this essay, I will examine this in relation to the worlds of politics, business and private life, as well as the counterpoint of progress made woven throughout. I will refer to data from a number of sources to ensure reliability and a lack of bias. I will also reference the works of Key Thinkers Sylvia Walby, Karl Marx, Robert Nozick and Kathleen Lynch.

The invisible woman in Irish society today is clearly seen in the sphere of politics. Only 22.5% of TDs are woman ([RTE](#)), below the global average of 25% ([UN Women](#)). Since 1919, only 9% of TDs, 11% of Senators and 19 ministers have been women (Houses of the Oireachtas). Women still face many barriers in joining the world of politics, such as stigma or pressure to remain at home caring for children - pressure often incompatible with Dáil schedules. Women are still not fully represented in Irish politics, further diminishing the possibility of effective, female-led legislation and contributing to their invisibility in politics.

While progress has certainly been made in reducing the invisibility of women in Irish politics, there is still much to be done. One may argue that this has been addressed by gender quotas, which saw a rise of 15% in female candidates from 2011-2016 ([Houses of the Oireachtas](#)). One could point to the increase in female TDs over the last number of years, or the prevalence of young women getting involved in activism and youth politics. While there has been progress, the facts outlined above remain true and it is imperative that we do not become complacent. We must acknowledge the work done, and continue to improve upon it to ensure women's voices are fully heard and uplifted in Irish politics, particularly those of marginalised women.

Key Thinker Sylvia Walby addressed the phenomenon of patriarchy in politics as one of the six structures of patriarchy. The patriarchal state, she wrote, exists to uphold the patriarchy, "a system of structures through which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". It prevents women from having

their voices heard, damaging the ability of legislation to protect women. This structure is clearly visible through the lack of female representation in Irish politics, and links to Mary Robinson's statement in the Irish Times regarding the invisible woman "you can't have a proper democracy without women being represented".

The phenomenon of the invisible woman in Irish society can further be seen in the world of business and employment. According to the 2016 Census, women make up 55% of university graduates yet their employment rate (59%) remains 10% lower than men's (69%). Furthermore, in 2016 the CSO found that only 1 in 9 boards of directors have a female chairperson and, on average, women are less likely to be promoted to high-level managerial positions. This causes women to not be seen or heard in senior positions within business, furthering the presence of the invisible woman. Many structures are at play in contributing to this. A primary one is societal pressure on women to remain working in the home, another of Walby's six structures of patriarchy.

Key Thinker Karl Marx wrote about women's lack of opportunity in business under a patriarchal, capitalist society, and how this creates invisibility and exploitation. Women working unpaid in the home, rather than in employment, maintains financial dependency on the "primary provider"- the man. Furthermore, he wrote, it is yet another example of capitalism exploiting labour. For Marx, women's progression and visibility in society and opportunity was a key indicator of progress and liberation.

From this, it is clear that patriarchy is at play in creating the invisible woman in Irish business, limiting women's access to employment, income and opportunities. However, some may argue that this is a result of women's personal choices to stay in the home and raise children. They may argue that maternity leave and women wanting to work less hours contributes to Ireland's 16% wage gap ([IHREC CEDAW report](#)). However, this counterpoint fundamentally ignores the societal pressure and expectation on women to remain working in the home. The IHREC CEDAW report found that pregnancy-related discrimination against women increased during the recession. This expectation perpetuates reasoning for paying, or hiring, women less. Therefore this cannot be used as justification for current levels of discrimination or to ignore the contributing societal pressures to this phenomenon.

Finally, the invisible woman can be clearly seen in women's private life in Irish society. This can be examined in relation to both harassment and unpaid care.

In 2015, the [EU](#) found that 40-50% of women have experienced harassment in the workplace. Worldwide, one in three women have experienced violence (CEDAW). However, in Ireland, only 29% of women who experience severe violence report it to An Garda Síochána ([Women's Aid](#)). Many women cite stigma or fear of retaliation as a reason for not reporting violence. This was referenced by Key Thinker Sylvia Walby, with violence against women acting as another structure of patriarchy. This is used to dominate women, and is often tolerated by the State through inaction. Walby would argue that by doing nothing, the State is in turn perpetuating this violence. From this, we see women silenced as elements of private patriarchy uphold the patriarchal state and maintain the invisible women in society.

This patriarchy leading to the invisible woman in Irish society can also be examined under the lens of unpaid care. According to the 2016 Census, there are currently 445,000 women working unpaid in the home, a 48x difference with 9,200 men. In total, in 2016, 6.6 million hours of unpaid care were worked, largely by women (CSO). Kathleen Lynch would cite this as a key example of "affective inequality", or inequality related to care. Women are not given adequate care or support for their labour in the household. This aids in perpetuating structures of patriarchy against women, as they struggle to gain financial independence or adequate support and, hence, the invisible woman is perpetuated by society.

Of course, these structures of patriarchy in private life leading to the invisible woman raise questions of what a State can do, and whether it can intervene at all. Key Thinker Robert Nozick may bring the libertarian counterpoint that the State has no business in the private lives of its citizens. To him, it should not use taxes to better aid opportunities or welfare for women, or any other citizen. However, to build on Hobbes' and Locke's view of the social contract and the duty of a State to provide security, the State has a duty to protect women. Where women are facing invisibility, violence and a lack of security in their private lives, they are not being granted the security for which they relinquished some of their liberties by entering into society. Therefore, the State has a moral and civic duty to tackle this element of the invisible woman in Irish society.

In conclusion, though much progress has been made in recent decades, the invisible woman remains a phenomenon in modern Irish society. This is clearly visible in politics, business and private life. In politics, women remain underrepresented and unheard in Ireland. As Sylvia Walby addressed, this illustrates the patriarchal state in play. In business, women are denied opportunities and visibility, as addressed by Karl Marx. Finally, the invisible woman is seen in the private lives of Irish women through harassment and unpaid care. Though a libertarian standpoint may oppose state action to tackle this, it is fundamentally necessary to grant women security. In essence, the structures of modern Irish society continue to create a society in which the invisible woman is a prevalent phenomenon. It is up to society to listen and to learn from women and bodies such as the IHREC and CEDAW, and work to liberate and empower women in modern Irish society.