

2020: Critically assess the view that as long as women in Ireland continue to do unpaid work and care for children and family members, discrimination and gender pay gaps will exist.

In our modern patriarchal society, there can be no doubt that as long as women in Ireland carry out unpaid domestic and care work, discrimination and gender pay gaps will continue. In this essay, I will discuss this in relation to three key points: unpaid work as a form of economic exploitation; how unpaid work perpetuates gender roles; and how societal pressure can act as a silencer of women. I will also discuss the counterpoint of personal choice. I will refer to Key Thinkers Sylvia Walby, Kathleen Lynch, Karl Marx and Robert Nozick, as well as data from a number of sources to ensure reliability.

Firstly, unpaid household and care work often function as a form of economic exploitation, disproportionately impacting women. The 2011 Census found that there were 445,000 women primarily working in the home. This stood in comparison to 9,200 men, marking a 48x disparity. Women are working long days in the home without payment, with their unpaid labour unrecognised by wider society. This work contributes to the economy through supporting workers in their home lives, or providing for children in education. Despite this economic and social contribution, however, women receive no compensation, thus qualifying economic exploitation. This was discussed by Key Thinker Sylvia Walby, who cited production relations in the household as one of the six structures of patriarchy. Unpaid work in the home is used, she wrote, to exploit women's labour. This was also argued by Karl Marx, who wrote that this unpaid labour is yet another example of capitalist exploitation of workers.

Therefore, it is clear that this unpaid labour constitutes economic exploitation. However, does its continuation guarantee discrimination? This leads back to the fact that this labour is unpaid, which is what causes its workers to be exploited. If it was paid, it would deliver compensation for labour. As it does not, it continues to disproportionately exploit women and enable discrimination, as will be discussed in further depth in my next point.

Leading from this, unpaid work and care by women in the household perpetuates gender roles and is used as a justification for them. Women in Ireland make up 55% of third-level graduates (CSO 2016). However, a disparity emerges as these students enter the workplace. The CSO states that women's employment rate (59.9%) is 10% lower than men's (69.9%). As discussed prior, women work proportionately more in the home, and have lower participation rates in the workforce. This begs the question, why? Ultimately, though women may be suitably qualified, societal expectations and 'traditional' feminine roles place pressure on them to work primarily in the home. This was further discussed by Sylvia Walby under production relations in the household and culture as two structures of the patriarchy. According to Walby, society creates expectations for women to work unpaid in the home. If they do not, their femininity is called into question. This was highlighted by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, the first female minister since Constance Markievicz. Geoghegan-Quinn stated to the Irish Times that she had been consistently asked how she could leave her children at home as TD, a question few, if any, men would receive. It is evident that societal gender roles act as a cause for women working unpaid in the home. As such, to reduce discrimination, they must be thoroughly challenged. If these expectations continue to be placed, pressuring women to work unpaid in the home, discrimination will never truly be addressed. Women must be supported and enabled to choose between working in the home or the workplace or both, and as such these gender roles must be challenged.

This leads to my third point, how the unpaid work and care outlined by this essay title is used as a silencer of women. As Kathleen Lynch states "those who are least powerful to assert their rights can be ignored or treated unjustly". Women who work unpaid and are financially dependent on their partner as a result are incredibly vulnerable to abuse within the home. [Women's Aid 2019](#) stated that only 29% of women who experience extreme violence report it to An Garda Síochána. A key reason behind this, they state, is the aforementioned financial dependency. Women working unpaid in the home are often unheard by society, particularly when it comes to abuse.

Furthermore, the expectation to carry out unpaid household work contributes to the political silencing of women. Walby outlines the patriarchal state as a key component of ensuring policies remain geared towards supporting the patriarchy. Walby's thinking is clearly visible in Ireland, with just 22.5% of our TDs being women (RTE), below the global average of 25% ([UN Women](#)). As outlined previously by Geoghegan-Quinn, societal pressure keeps women in the home and out of politics, preventing them from contributing towards policy that furthers women's rights. As [Mary Robinson](#)

states “you can’t have a proper democracy without women being represented”. This political silencing enables discrimination to continue, as women are not heard on issues such as the pay gap. Therefore, unpaid work and care silences women in both personal and political spheres, and adds to further discrimination due to a lack of visibility and platforms for female voices to be heard.

Finally, there is the counterpoint of unpaid work and care being the personal choice of the women. This argument would state that this is a private choice for the woman, and not a matter of policy or government to address any perceived resulting discrimination. Key Thinker Robert Nozick’s writing supports this line of thinking, citing the “minimal state” as the state’s only justification. Therefore, it should not intervene with the personal lives of its citizens, and instead focus only on protecting life, liberty and property. However, this argument ignores that the societal pressure and gender roles outlined above prevent this from being an entirely free or private choice. Furthermore, in line with Nozick’s thinking, when women are forced by society to work or care unpaid in the home, their liberty is threatened and they experience discrimination. Therefore, this unpaid work must be fundamentally challenged to enable it to be a woman’s genuine, free choice before this argument can be proved true.

In conclusion, unpaid work and care in the home will continue to enable discrimination and pay gaps until it, and the ideas around it, are changed. It is a clear form of economic exploitation, in line with Marxist thinking and Sylvia Walby’s structures of patriarchy. Secondly, this is driven by and perpetuates gender roles, as discussed by Walby, Women are not enabled to make a free choice, and as such until these pressures are addressed, discrimination will occur. This unpaid work and care acts to silence women, both privately and politically. It makes them dependent and limits their voices in political change around discrimination and the pay gap. Finally, though there is the counterpoint that this is a personal choice, as long as it is unpaid and societal coercion exists, it is a forced choice and continues the cycle of wider discrimination. Ultimately, until this work is paid and valued by society, discrimination in all its forms- in the workplace, education, politics and beyond- will continue to exist against women.