

Sarah McInerney

Crisis tears off mask of gender equality



Closed creches and lack of pay leave women to bear brunt of social fallout

They've been put on a boat and pushed out to sea. They've been abandoned." This is how the employment lawyer Richard Grogan describes the situation of women on maternity leave who are seeking to return to work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Speaking to me on RTE Radio 1 last week, Grogan was responding to a question from a new mother who had been due to resume her job. Her creche is closed and she has no childcare. If she stays at home, which she will, because babies take about 18 years to become self-sufficient, she will be disqualified from the jobseekers' payment for nine weeks, on the basis that she has "left work voluntarily". Nor is this new mother eligible for the Covid-19 wage subsidy, which would allow her to get close to full pay, because she wasn't on the payroll when the pandemic hit. She has to wait to pay, food to buy, a newborn baby, and a government that doesn't seem to care. And she's not alone. Anne Rabbitte, a Fianna Fail TD, began publicising similar such cases three weeks ago. Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald wrote to finance minister Paschal Donohoe on April 24 asking for the anomalies around maternity leave to be addressed. Nothing has been done so far. Grogan says there are other issues too. Many women due to return from maternity leave are being told that their job has gone or that they've been demoted. He predicts a "tsunami of layoffs" in the Workplace Relations Commission when the pandemic is over. The self-described "hardened employment lawyer", Grogan says he has been deeply upset by many of the cases he is working on.

It is upsetting, of course, but not at all surprising. The clear message from our political and business leaders has long been that child-bearing and child-rearing are an unfortunate necessity, to be tolerated but not encouraged. There was another depressing example of this attitude last week when it emerged that the government's planned childcare scheme for healthcare workers, the majority of whom are women, was to be scrapped. Ministers were able to nationalise temporarily our private hospitals overnight, but after six weeks of discussion not one of them had the wherewithal to figure out a plan to mind children. They can stand in the Dail and clap for frontline health workers, but when it comes to giving practical and much needed help to the women at the coalface of Covid-19? Political tumbleweed.

The sluggish approach was to be expected, really. This is a country, let's remember, where there is no maternity leave for female TDs. Instead, they must provide a sick cert to get time off to have a baby, as if pregnancy were

some sort of ailment. Rabbitte published legislation in 2017 to address this, providing for maternity leave for TDs. For three years, the TD for Galway East advocated for her bill at every opportunity. Meanwhile, the mostly male campaign strategists of the big political parties fretted about why they couldn't find quality female candidates to run for election, to fulfil those pesky gender quotas. Rabbitte's bill fell with the last Dail.

There is some good news, though. Female TDs were given the privilege of being "allowed" to breastfeed at Leinster House in 2018. No doubt the babies are very grateful.

It is during times of crisis that the mask of equality slips. We've seen this before: women being targeted by employers or abandoned by the government. During the previous recession, the Fine Gael-Labour coalition changed the state pension so people who had taken time off work - mostly women, looking after children - had their payments cut by up to €1,500 a year. It took six years of lobbying and political pressure to have the decision reversed. The same government also cut benefits for single parents, who are - you guessed it - predominantly female.

A report by the Economic and Social Research Institute in 2018 found it was women who bore the brunt of that coalition government's decisions to cut welfare payments during the recession, with lone parents, stay-at-home mothers and low-income earners faring the worst.

We are now on the cusp of another crisis, and already the same pattern is beginning to emerge. Women, ever the easy targets in Irish society, are being put on a boat and pushed out to sea. Enough. It's time to turn the tide.
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“After six weeks, not one minister had figured out a plan to mind children”

...s, Rory
...oy, Brooks
...ka, Dustin
...son, Justin

distance. ...
cranes," he said. "I'm paying
for them." His ex-wife, Elin,
was knocking down a 1932

time his ...
tells the 21st person, 'Hey,
I finish my dinner and sign

"I have ...