



Ellen Coyne

## We need to talk about...

### ... how we can make the 'woman's place' amendment actually useful for women

I've seen cardboard signs floating above a protest on O'Connell Street telling me a woman's place is in the revolution, and in the resistance. I've seen glossy PR for multinationals, poorly disguised as activism, telling me that a woman's place is in the boardroom. And I've seen Irish politicians, co-opting feminism, telling us we should rail against the suggestion that a woman's place is in the home.

Everyone pays a lot of attention to the controversial "woman's place" amendment in the Irish constitution — where it suggests quite plainly that a woman's only role in Irish society should be as a housewife and a mother. It's exactly the kind of dull sexism one would expect from the unholy union between the Irish Catholic Church and the State in the 1930s. Over the past few years, government politicians have been earnestly telling us how we must banish this misogynistic, oppressive and backwards notion from the constitution lest there be any mistake about where Ireland is as a country. That's pretty typical. If I was a political party that realised belatedly at the end of the last decade that there was electoral capital in supporting women's rights, I too would be chasing the same buzz by combing the constitution for other "womeny"-sounding things to repeal.

Personally, I would be nervous about taking my feminist cues from the politicians who brought us the radical idea of trying to make them change the name of *The Kerryman*. When it comes time to vote to change the "woman's place" amendment, we can't let the government away with running a simplistic campaign that ruins our chance to do something actually useful for women.

Obviously, the amendment as it is is offensive and should be changed to at least be gender-neutral. But it has a radical element that should be salvaged. The constitution says that the State should try to "ensure that mothers shall not be obliged

by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home". Of course, it never did this. But it should have. Sometimes discussion around this amendment has focused on rich women with really good jobs who are offended by the suggestion that they should stay at home. There's usually less attention on women, often poorer women, who would rather stay at home but who are forced to work. While nobody is revising Éamon de Valera as an accidental girlboss, it would be literally life-changing for women who choose to stay at home to live in a country where they are economically supported for doing so.

Almost every major fight for women's rights has been about choice. Capitalism has succeeded in making us think that being economically forced to run a home, care for children and manage a career all at the same time is liberating. Expensive fertility clinics are pressuring women in their early twenties to find the money to freeze their eggs so that they can work longer and harder before trying to start a family. Women have the worst of both worlds where there isn't a choice to either work or start a family, but an expectation to do both. Women who choose to not have children or be homemakers are still regarded with suspicion or derision, and those who leave their professional career to stay at home also face judgements and aspersions.

Choosing to stay at home, for those of us who want to, is important, hard and rewarding work. Yet it doesn't have enough of a social or economic value placed on it by the State. If it did, more of us would be able to afford to do it. It is impossible for most people in most parts of Ireland to get a mortgage on just one income. Working at home is simply not a choice for most women.

Of course men can and should be encouraged to be the stay-at-home carer if and when they want to. But we know that usually when a man and a woman both work and raise a family, the woman will be disproportionately responsible for managing housework and childcare.

If politicians want to change the constitution so that it reflects a modern, new and progressive country, then it should not be repealing the amendment but improving it. The role of carers of any and all genders, and the value that they bring to the State, should be enshrined in the constitution and backed up by real economic supports. This should apply not just to those who are raising a family, but who act as carers in any capacity. It would be way too easy for an Irish government to just repeal the "woman's place" amendment, as yet another headline-grabbing but ultimately empty feminist gesture.

Despite the fact the "woman's place" amendment was written in a very different spirit, it has created a rare opportunity to force the State to support stay-at-home mothers in a radical way. Because a woman's place should be wherever she wants it to be.

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## We need to talk about...

### ... how the return to normal shouldn't mean the return of homelessness

**G**rand Canal Square did not wear the pandemic well. Its architecture is designed to be slick, shiny and important looking. It's all hard edges and bold shapes, which double like a butterfly print in the reflection of the water. Maybe that worked before, when the square was the set on which people rushed around making and spending money.

I moved near it during the first lockdown, and I always thought the square looked austere and exposed once the office workers and tourists abandoned it. Its bombastic buildings, with their bombastic rents, suddenly seemed sheepish and idle. Had this place really ever been the centre of anything? Some empty places can feel tranquil, others are just deserted.

In the scary days of the first wave, a nearby hotel became conspicuously busy among the forlorn bars and theatres. It was being repurposed to accommodate homeless people, who had swiftly been identified as a group particularly vulnerable to the virus.

This happened all over Dublin city in 2020. The sudden increase in available accommodation was dramatic. Nobody needed Airbnbs, nobody wanted hotels. The rates dropped to levels that Dublin City Council could afford, and the accommodation was snapped up for homeless people.

Frontline healthcare workers, who worked exclusively with vulnerable people, were declaring Dublin's Covid-19 plan for homeless people a success from as early as April 2020. People had secure, own-door accommodation. There was space to isolate rough sleepers who tested positive. Overcrowding in hostels vanished. As a result, the numbers of homeless people showing up at emergency departments plummeted, and waiting times for homeless addiction services plummeted. All while a rent freeze was credited with potentially stopping more people falling into homelessness.

The city had effectively, for the time being anyway, all but solved homelessness — an achievement that cold suits on

TV had often laughed off as impossible. Now, the hotel near Grand Canal is quiet again. I check room rates online, and I see that they are climbing back up. The big offices in this part of town don't make people wear uniforms, but they still all dress the same. The leggings and jumpers of people on perpetual walks have been replaced by the crisp, monochrome outfits of office workers. The crowds swell in the local coffee shop. The theatre is selling tickets again. Things are moving back to normal. People making money, people spending money. I don't know where they put the homeless people that were in the hotel.

Do you remember how they kept telling us before that homelessness was normal? Usually in condescending interviews given as the public's horror rose in proportion with the numbers of children living in hotels. The problem we have now is that we know what 'normal' is: pitting homeless people against tourists, in a cruel competition where they don't stand a chance.

This isn't simple or straightforward. Homeless accommodation only increased last year because the tourism industry collapsed overnight. A lot of people suffered, a lot of people lost their jobs and a lot of businesses may never recover. Dublin is a major European city, and we cannot pretend that tourism is not a key part of our economy. However, we also cannot pretend that we didn't notice what we managed to do for some of the most vulnerable people in the city once society briefly stopped mistaking a person's economic worth for their total value.

When the crisis of this pandemic is finally restrained, the housing crisis will still remain. As Covid-19 relaxes its grasp on the front pages, other stories have a chance to be heard again: students forced to use food banks because of high rents, nurses with nowhere to sleep but in a car, families who cannot find a home. Epidemiologists and public health experts will soon have to pass the microphones back to politicians who read the same old scripts: "supply problem", "the market", "cannot be fixed overnight".

It is not realistic to expect the city of Dublin to maintain the exact extraordinary and emergency conditions that led to such a dramatic improvement in emergency housing last year. But would it be moral to refuse to learn anything from it? A crisis presented us with a social experiment, and that experiment has thrown up a quandary. How will politicians continue to tell us that homelessness is an unsolvable problem, now that we know that it isn't?

The collapse of Dublin's tourism was an extreme. I think you could also argue that a complete deference to people who make money from hotels and holiday lets, over the wants and needs of the people who live in a city, is an extreme in the other direction.

Let's not go back to a normal that nobody wanted.

**'We managed to do something for some of the most vulnerable people in the city once society briefly stopped mistaking a person's economic worth for their total value'**

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## We need to talk about...

### ... the chilling ubiquity of Facebook in our communities

**A** new neighbourhood is a blank canvas. You pass the GAA pitch in a car stuffed with moving boxes and paint a landscape where you stand ensconced in a sideline of proud parents on a cold Saturday morning. The local pub is the backdrop where a portrait of a friend, not yet made, shares and savours the details of a delicious local drama with you. And your own door is now one of many that make up the tapestry of your new community.

Being new to the parish also draws you to unexpected places. A new neighbour, pressing a bottle of wine into my hands over my threshold, warmly invited me to join the Facebook group for the estate. It would have everything I needed, she said, and she was right. Registering for a GP, offloading leftover furniture from the old homeowners, finding a woman down the street who could make a birthday cake last minute for me: all of it had been centralised to one virtual community hub. Soon I was coming back to Facebook almost daily, studiously avoiding my graceless college photos and achingly painful missives from my mortifying past which had sat preserved on a social network I'd long ago abandoned.

I don't like that I'm spending more time on Facebook. I fear that one day I'll log on seeking the number for a local electrician, and the next I won't be vaccinating my children. Unfortunately, opting out of the now infamous social network no longer feels like an option for me. It's how you buy cheap, local furniture. It's how you find out which bin to put out. It's how you find out which school to pick. Facebook has become a local lynchpin.

Facebook can spend all the time and money in the world flogging fancy metaverses from the wireless microphones of clumsy entrepreneurs on slick stages, it will still be the social network people use to livestream Mass and sell their garden furniture to their neighbours. Though the antithesis

of the innovative and revolutionary prestige that Facebook would surely prefer to regard itself in, the dowdy and parochial is where its power really lies. The handy, humdrum reasons that we need to use Facebook are what will make it most dangerous for the rest of us. Insiders who bravely blow the whistle on the malicious, dangerous and reckless practices of social networks will never be able to compete with convenience. For as long as it remains an integral part of our neighbourhood infrastructure, we will all be captive users of Facebook regardless of how many of its shocking secrets come to light.

Escaping Facebook used to mean enduring the annoying but fairly doable task of downloading all your debs photos and an address book of forgettable birthday dates. Now, for some of us, the consequence of leaving could genuinely mean isolating yourself from your community. Private Facebook residents groups and neighbourhood WhatsApp chats — hosted on a platform also owned by the same company — have become the beating hearts of Irish localities. It's where help is asked for and offered, and it's where communities rally. It was evident in the first phase of Covid-19, when people recognised local Facebook groups for the digital lifelines that they were for those bluntly forced to "cocoon" by emergency public health policy in 2020. It remains true now for those scattered around by a housing market that often prices young families out of their own neighbourhoods and sends them to more affordable but stranger places. We're all blow-ins now.

If a global beast of a company like Facebook has become this integral to one small north Dublin community, the company is too big. The scale of it is too great. It's gone beyond a monopoly and has become chillingly ubiquitous. I know, as Facebook flexes its algorithm and presents me with more local and more personalised community access, that there is no doubt this company must be broken up.

Some people have argued that Facebook is basically a utility now. We would never be comfortable with letting a private company have a monopoly over any other utility. Certainly not one that has been associated with a plague of misinformation and wreaking havoc on elections. Would you trust Mark Zuckerberg to be the one to run your parish newsletter? Too late, he already is.

The deeper Facebook is ingrained in our everyday lives, the more remote the prospect of proper regulation of it becomes. Once we lose our ability to withdraw ourselves as Facebook's most valuable product, we lose our negotiating power. There goes hope for reform. There goes the chance to force social responsibility on internet giants. There goes the neighbourhood.

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