
Book Review: *Holding it Together: How Women Became America's Safety Net* by Jessica Calarco

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How did women become America's safety net? What confounding systems and ideologies placed women in this role? In *Holding It Together: How Women Became America's Safety Net*, Jessica Calarco, a professor of sociology specializing in families, schools, and inequalities, explores how U.S. women are placed in the position of "holding it all together" in the wake of a failed social safety net. She argues that a combination of systemic ideologies and policies placed this burden on women and examines its toll on their well-being, relationships, and communities. Calarco contends that this illusion of a "DIY society" does not reflect the reality of women's lives. Rather, it masks the insecurities and strains within their families and communities. Society perpetuates the idea that the safety net is still intact by demanding that women fill this role. Many women are forced or pressured to be "the glue that holds it all together" (2024:12). Calarco highlights how the systems in place fail to acknowledge the emotional and physical toll that women experience by filling this role. This book stresses the need for a real safety net and reveals the truth behind the illusion that women should bear these burdens alone.

Calarco examines the roles American women play in maintaining the social safety net. The social safety net allows society and the economy to survive. In the U.S., women form the bonds for the barren safety net. Women were forced to fill in for the U.S. safety net as the nation choose profits over national childcare, healthcare and supporting families who need it. She argues that women are key to upholding the illusion of a "DIY society," a concept formed by the U.S. adoption of neoliberalism (2024: 12). After World War II, the United States shifted away from expanding its social safety net and instead broke down the net that was already in place. This shift marked the U.S. adoption of neoliberalism, reducing government support while allowing businesses and corporations to thrive. It was sold as a narrative that wealth would "trickle down" to the rest of society (2024: 10).

Pro-neoliberal propaganda fueled this narrative. Over time, politicians backed by corporate interests were elected and enacted policies that still dominate now. The “DIY society” suggests that individuals are expected to solve their problems, without relying on the government or employers for support. Individuals unable to navigate these challenges by themselves are often blamed or stigmatized. The illusion of this system rests solely on women. They are expected to bear the burden of being the social safety net. Turning a blind eye to the struggles and weight placed upon women by this system perpetuates the illusion that the DIY society works.

This book is structured into two distinct parts. Each part addresses how women came to carry the responsibility of maintaining America’s social safety net and why it continues to persist. Calarco structures her points around interviews and follow-up interviews with women from Indiana from 2018-2022. While Indiana may not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the broader U.S. population, Calarco ensures that the women she interviewed represent a variety of political standpoints and social class backgrounds. She incorporates national surveys and data from varying historical, political, and economic sources to strengthen her arguments in each chapter. The different layers of evidence are thoughtfully intertwined, providing personal and data-based insights into how women were placed into this role. She also uses socially constructed myths, prevalent in American culture, to expose the other forces that have defined women’s roles. Part one lays the foundation for understanding how women have been made to “hold it together,” filling the void left by a broken social safety net. Part two addresses why this issue has not been effectively rectified. Her argument focuses on a persistent “lack of will to change,” noting how adopted societal myths and conforming gender expectations prevent reform (2024: 190). The conclusion outlines steps for change, advocating for a “union of care” and establishing a formed and equitable social safety net (2024: 201).

The research and conclusions drawn by Calarco in *Holding It Together* are both eye-opening and deeply compelling. It does more than explore this issue alone; the multitude of content builds upon itself, culminating in a powerful call for change.

Calarco shows that women shouldn't continue to bear the burden of a failing safety net and uphold the illusion of the "DIY society." Women may not have had a say in how they came to occupy this role, but now they have the agency to change it. The interviews were conducted exclusively in Indiana, which may not fully reflect the racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of the broader U.S. population but this does not diminish the book's impact. The voices of the women interviewed offer invaluable insights into the wider issues affecting women across the U.S. The addition of various data types and the use of socially constructed myths strengthens the book's impact. A broader geographic range of interviews would have made the work even more representative, but the current body of work remains incredibly powerful. The strengths of this book lie in its ability to resonate on multiple levels, inspiring women to recognize their value and demand change that has been long ignored.

Holding It Together is not just a body of research; it is an effective call to action. This book is not just for those in academia; it was written for women and those who care to make a difference. Calarco's work is centered around interviews with women who find themselves burdened with upholding the safety net and perpetuating the illusion of the "DIY society." Human experience is interwoven with data that forces the reader to feel the impact of these issues on a personal level. It is demonstrated that myths are shaped by American policy and culture which further reinforces the roles of women. The book challenges readers to explore the consequences of a flawed system that continues to exploit and hinder women. If we continue to follow the constructed path the burden and struggles that women face will persist. However, if this system is collectively challenged and care is reimagined change is possible. The purpose of this piece is to reflect on the failures of the past and inspire a more equitable future for women and those who care.

REFERENCES

Calarco, Jessica. 2024. *Holding it Together: How Women Became America's Safety Net*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.