building homes

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In my last KSInsights entry, I argued that the language of rights is ontologically thin: a rights-first politics presumes isolated bearers of entitlement who face one another, and the state, as separate, competing units. That frame can win defensive struggles, but it does not give us enough material grip to rebuild the social order that is producing crisis after crisis. If "rights" are not an adequate load-bearing structure, what is?

Let's approach the question the way policy people do when they are honest with themselves. The sacred, but unreachable, dream in policy work is the masterstroke; one intervention that, if enacted, would relieve many pressures at once. It is a Platonic ideal; history and power ensure we will never fully attain it. Still, the horizon matters because it forces us to search for the leverage that cuts across silos. I want to propose that we already have the beginnings of such a leverage point. It is not a regulation buried in an annex page. It is something far closer, the organization of home and the work that sustains it.

Before making that turn, we need to take stock of the pressure building in the system. Start with mental health. The most recent rounds of Global Burden of Disease accounting show that close to one billion people worldwide were living with a mental disorder on the eve of the pandemic; modelling for 2019 puts prevalence at a roughly one in eight to one in nine people, and mental disorders together represented a substantial share of global years lived with disability. Updated analysis indicates that, when translated into disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), the burden exceeded 150 million in 2021, with severe conditions associated with dramatically shortened life expectancy, often by one to two decades relative to population averages.

Suicide alone takes more than 720,000 lives every year worldwide. It now ranks among the top causes of death for young people; the World Health Organization reports it as the third leading cause of death among those aged 15-29, and nearly three-quarters of all suicides occur in low and middle-income countries. Recent WHO data releases and allied reporting underscore large gender and regional disparities, but the same hard fact: the reality of life is too unbearable for these victims of the system.

Why, amid unprecedented material abundance for many, are minds in such distress? If consumer choice and digital convenience were enough, we should be living in a golden age of contentment. Instead, we see rising reports of anxiety, depression, burnout, and alienation, especially among youth. One place to look is work. The WHO and ILO catalogue a cluster of psychosocial risks that drive work-related mental harm: job insecurity, low or volatile pay, excessive or unmanageable workloads, long or irregular hours, discrimination and harassment, and low autonomy. These conditions, widespread across contemporary labor markets, are not accidents; they are consistent with a production regime that extracts ever more attention, adaptability, and emotional labor while offloading risk onto individuals.

The public health and occupational medicine literature goes further: exposure to such psychosocial hazards raises stress biomarkers, predicts higher rates of depression and burnout, and generates large medical and productivity costs. A recent call to action synthesised decades of evidence linking unemployment, shift work, long hours, low job control, and work family conflict to elevated health risk, estimating medical costs in the hundreds of billions of dollars in the US, even before counting the lost quality of life.

These harms do not remain confined to individual well-being; they ripple outward into politics. Comparative political research has begun to trace how economic insecurity and perceived job precarity feed demand for populist and radical alternatives, particularly where mainstream parties appear indifferent to everyday material stress. Multi-country European panel studies link work and financial insecurity to populist attitudes and voting behavior; related work on economic shocks shows that downturns push voters toward "risky" outsider options and depress turnout, reshaping party systems. Journalistic synthesis, drawing on these studies, have flagged the same connection for broader audiences, when labor markets feel extractive and unstable, exclusivist and anti-establishment politics find fertile ground.

Work intensity also erodes the fabric of community life more directly. Long commutes and long hours leave little time for neighbors, civic groups, or extended family. Empirical work in the United States has shown that longer commute times correlate with lower social capital, fewer socially oriented trips, and weaker participation in local networks. Studies that compare workplaces and communities find that higher perceived social capital, mutual trust, support, and participation are associated with lower burnout and better health among workers in high-stress sectors; broader reviews of associational decline warn that when we bowl alone, democratic capacity and even economic performance suffer.

All of these point to a deeper organizing principle: we have built a social order that treats people primarily as units of production and consumption. Human needs that cannot be cleanly monetized, time to care, to recover, to share meals, to raise children in extended networks, to build community, are residual claims on whatever energy is left after the market day. When the market day expands (through long hours, shift volatility, side hustles to plug income gaps), the residual shrinks. A society that is arranged around this extraction logic will reliably generate mental distress, demographic hesitation, and political volatility. This is the structure of madness.

If all these symptoms point in the same direction, the root is plain: we have arranged social life as if people were inputs to be scheduled and drained, not humans who need time and relationships to stay whole. A system built to squeeze labor and sell distraction leaves almost no protected space for simply living, for being with children, elders, friends, for recovering, for making meaning, for showing up in neighborhood life. Treating humans as humans, therefore, starts with giving time back, and the place where time gathers is the home, not just the physical dwelling, but the network of people who keep one another alive.

Call the work of maintaining that network domestic labor. By this I mean far more than cooking and cleaning. Domestic labor is the full spectrum of tasks that reproduce people day to day and across generations; preparing food, cleaning, laundry, and repair, caring for children, elders, and disabled family members. It is the taken-for-granted labor that turns a set of individuals into a lived home. Under our current social arrangement, most of it is unwaged, feminized, and hidden, yet its economic value is enormous, and its time demands shape who can work, study, or engage in public life. Global time use and labor data show women and girls still do the large majority of unpaid care hours, and these unpaid hours literally produce the labor power on which markets run, and newer policy work links investment in care systems and safety nets to better health, poverty reduction, and gender equality outcomes.

When we collectivize care, through public childcare, elder support, neighborhood care cooperatives, community health workers, income floors, and policies that guarantee living time, we convert domestic labor from a private drag into shared social infrastructure. The shift does three things at once: it restores human time, it reduces the unequal burden that pushes women out of paid work, it suppresses births, and it rebuilds the everyday safety nets that anchor mental health and political stability. By shifting part of the care load into shared, supported infrastructure, we lower the time tax on households, reduce gender inequality, and give people real room to form and sustain families.

Re-centering policy on the home in this way also reframes the “rights” question. Rather than defending abstract entitlements for atomized individuals, we ask what every home needs so that the people in it can live, care, and participate as equals.

Now we have to imagine, to build this world, what do we need to do is;

Public Universal Childcare & Education

Early care is presently treated as a household tradeoff; one parent curtails paid work so the other can earn, producing lost income, unequal careers, and often patchy early childhood learning because families must improvise without support. Evidence from universal or expanded childcare rollouts shows persistent gains in mothers’ labor force participation, full-time employment, and earnings across the life course; studies in Denmark, Japan, Spain, and other contexts repeatedly find that easing access to affordable care boosts maternal employment, with mixed but instructive fertility effects. Making high-quality, publicly supported early education broadly available reduces the penalty families pay for having children and improves developmental inputs that most households cannot provide alone at scale.

Public Elder & Disability Care

As populations age, leaving elder and disability support to families produces burnout, foregone wages, and preventable institutionalization. Community-based elder services and home and community-based disability waivers have been shown to improve both objective and subjective health, reduce loneliness and depression, and help people remain in their communities longer, often at costs comparable to or lower than residential care once hospital and emergency use are counted. Systematic reviews across multiple countries indicate that when governments fund accessible community care, older adults’ wellbeing improves and caregiver strain eases, strengthening households that might otherwise fracture under the load.

Communal Housing & Services

Housing models that combine private space with shared commons consistently report lower isolation, stronger mutual support, and better self-rated health, especially for older adults but increasingly across age groups. When a neighbor falls ill, support is already close. When parents need an hour’s cover, someone down the hall is part of the network. When food prices spike, a shared bulk pantry softens the blow. Designing for shared life creates first-response capacity for everyday shocks before they escalate into public emergencies.

Dignity Work Policies
This policy will reclaim time and health from the labor market. Long or unpredictable hours, poverty wages, forced flexibility, and unsafe conditions bleed into every other domain, including mental health, family stability, and community participation. Labor laws that set real limits on hours, enforce living wages, ban predatory contracts, guarantee paid leave, and give workers a voice are the front line of mental health policy, gender equity policy, and community policy.

Public Food Production & Distribution
School meals, community kitchens, local procurement hubs, and urban or peri-urban food programmes do triple duty: they cut hunger and malnutrition, free family income for other needs, and create stable demand for local producers and food service jobs. Shared meals are also social glue; a community that cooks and eats together builds trust that no subsidy alone can buy.

Last but not least,

Universal Basic Services
This is the umbrella that locks these gains in place. When the essentials of a decent life, health care, education, childcare, elder support, transport, digital access, shelter, energy, food basics, are provided as guaranteed services, households are freed from constant calculation and crisis juggling. Costs fall, shocks hurt less, and people can plan. Universal services are a platform for dignity: they say that what makes us human is not how much market income we can command, but the fact that we are members of a community that has decided no one goes without the basics of a livable life.

Taken together, these measures expand the public realm, and that expansion is socially necessary and economically constructive. Building a 'home' will increase the one resource a market society never prices properly: time. Where housing, care, food, and core services are treated as public goods, downstream emergency costs fall and local supply chains stabilize. But above all, these policies aim specifically to build good homes, places where time, care, and mutual security are protected as public goods rather than left to chance or private wealth. Expand government in these domains and you do more than stimulate the economy, you rebuild the human base on which any decent economy stands.

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