

Shedding light on the conditions of “millions of women in the shadows of mainstream America”

Hold Me Down: A day in the life of a single mother in the Bronx

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Hold Me Down is a 28-minute short film by Swedish director, Niclas Gillis, about a day in the life of a 19-year-old single mother who works as a stripper at an illegal nightclub to support her young child in the South Bronx.

All the roles in *Hold Me Down* are played by nonprofessionals who have experienced the impoverished underground world portrayed in the film. Based on true events, the movie was shot on location in public housing projects in the Mott Haven neighborhood of the Bronx and an actual brothel. The film premiered at the Gothenburg International Film Festival in January 2017, and this last week was released for free viewing online.

Only 28 years old, Gillis has produced a work that shines in comparison to most of what appears in movie theaters today. He notes on the film’s website that he set out to “shed light on a life led by millions of women in the shadows of mainstream America.”

The film is most successful in speaking to the universal figure of the struggling mother, and the difficulties of scraping together the basic necessities of life. It is a story that is sadly commonplace and one which seldom sees the light of day in Hollywood, particularly in such a realistic manner.

Hold Me Down centers around Chastity (Tianna Allen), who lives with her mother, sister and young daughter. The film opens with shots of flies landing on the faces of Chastity and her daughter as they sleep. It then cuts to Chastity changing her daughter. Unable to afford the disposable versions, Chastity wraps her daughter in toilet paper and a plastic bag to fashion a

makeshift diaper.

The story of this young mother is never separated from society and the outside world. Even in this quiet scene, neighbors’ arguments can be heard through the walls and the viewer gets a sense of the ways in which poverty bears down on every social relationship.

In a subway scene, speakers boom that “Backpacks and large containers are subject to random search by the police.” While her friends buy lunch, Chastity, unable to pay, insists she is not hungry.

Back at home, her mother, a middle-aged woman, rages at Chastity for not making enough money to buy diapers for her child, “Why you out at night if you not making any money? ... I work all day ... I’m f----- tired, do you understand!” and threatens to throw her out.

Chastity’s mother (Cheryl Juniaus) is another universal character: a working class woman for whom life is nothing but endless, frustrating struggle and who has been emotionally hardened by poverty and want. The reduction of the family relationship to a mere monetary connection is a central theme as the weight of financial burdens strains the protagonists’ relationships.

Chastity has a somber disposition, is quiet and generally reserved. She accepts an invitation to dance at a bachelor party, only to realize that the party is for Prince (Prince Richard Combs), a man whom she had been in love with and who no longer returns her calls. The only happiness to be caught in her voice in *Hold Me Down* comes during an old video taken when she and Prince were together.

Chastity's daughter watches while she gets dressed to work the bachelor party. Tragically, one feels that the little girl will fare no better in this life. As Chastity dresses, the music of a millionaire pop star plays on the radio.

She walks alone in the silent corridors of the projects where she lives and in dark streets and subways. Exiting her building, Chastity is approached by a van and the viewer feels the dangers she faces.

Later at the party, she self-medicates to cope with being ignored by Prince, and a friend, Tanisha (Tanisha Lambright), tries to boost Chastity's self-esteem.

While Chastity is dancing she attempts to leave the stage, but is pushed back by a crowd and raped by a group of men. The event is a regular one and she is required to give \$60 to a manager and tip the bouncer on her way out of the party. Still in her dancing outfit, Chastity walks home in the morning light with a bag of diapers. She slips quietly into her room, deposits \$27 in a drawer and cries over her young daughter asleep in bed.

Vignettes posted on the film's site by actors Allen and Lambright offer interpretations of the film's title. *Hold Me Down*, they explain, is akin to asking someone to "please have my back," "be there for me," and "look out for me." A condition clearly absent from the lives of these women and the millions forced into varying degrees of exploitation, including sexual exploitation.

The *Hold Me Down* website references the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." Furthermore, "all children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection."

The website continues: "According to recent studies by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the US currently has the second highest level of income inequality in the developed world, second only to Chile; and the second highest level of income heritability, second only to the United Kingdom; which means that there is almost no other country in the developed world where the disparity

between rich and poor is greater, and the likelihood of a person making it from one to the other is worse."

There is no doubt that Gillis has produced a deeply sincere work, which exposes the deep poverty and inequality in the US. The film should be seen by a wide audience for its realistic and moving depictions.

The *Hold Me Down* website offers links for assistance programs aimed at getting women and girls out of prostitution. This, along with the reference to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, points to the limitations of the filmmakers' perspective.

What happens to Chastity is appalling. But so much about the existence in which her assault occurs is appalling—the almost unrelieved coldness and harshness of Mott Haven's projects, the poverty-stricken streets of the south Bronx, the starvation wages and precarious economy, the often cruel and brutalized relationships that develop under these conditions.

American capitalism has created the unbearable poverty depicted with considerable honesty in *Hold Me Down*. In the richest country in the world, only a revolutionary movement by the working class can reorganize society to rid it of want and suffering.



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