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Motherhood and the media under the Microscope: The backlash against feminism and the Mommy Wars

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Despite the passing of sexual discrimination legislation, the difficulty of combining work and motherhood repeatedly hits the headlines. This paper looks at the American media phenomenon known as the ‘mommy wars’ and asks if British mothers can expect to face the same issues and attitudes as their American sisters.

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Surveying the acres of newsprint dedicated to the subject of mothers and mothering, it would seem, on the surface at least, that childrearing remains the most important job a woman can do. For example, women are warned that if they work post-childbirth they not only risk damaging their child’s prospects (Harris; Doughty), but that their off-spring are six times more likely to be overweight (Borland); they are cautioned not to delay starting a family because of declining fertility (Borland) but, on the other hand, warned of the dire consequences of teenage pregnancy (Phillips). The media storm over Republican Party candidate Rick Santorum’s views on single mothers (Murphy & Kroll) coupled with accusations that Britain’s 2011 summer City riots were fuelled by the failure of single mothers to raise their children properly (Gold) are further proof of how motherhood outside of marriage is viewed negatively by many. Indeed, after studying a cross section of headlines relating to motherhood from the past decade, it should be no surprise to discover that both working and stay-at-home mothers are prone to depression (Rochman; CTV), a condition no doubt exacerbated by the plethora of media stories about how they should, or should not, be raising their children. It is little wonder then that women find themselves confused and conflicted over the demands of motherhood and how that impacts upon their relationship with their sense of self.

What follows is an investigation into whether the agenda behind these media reports is less about what is best for mothers and children and more about the needs of society. I will first provide a very brief history of the configuration of the post industrial family, paying particular attention to the role of the mother: how she evolved into being the main caregiver of the family and how both the British and American media have, in turn, monitored, commented on, and policed that role. I will then turn to the more recent phenomenon known as the “mommy wars,” a discourse

originating in the American media that pitched stay-at-home mothers against working ones in an alleged battle between two opposing styles of mothering. This media onslaught, I shall argue, is the latest incarnation of the backlash against feminism which, as theorised by journalist Susan Faludi, comes to the fore whenever women are perceived as making too many inroads into supposed “male domains.” Faludi argues that this reaction, or “backlash” can be traced back to “the rise of restrictive property laws and penalties for unwed and childless women of ancient Rome, the heresy judgements against female disciples of the early Christian Church, or the mass witch burnings of medieval Europe” (*Backlash* 67). While we can be grateful that the burning of women has long been outlawed in both North America and Europe, I shall argue that this round of media reporting is repeatedly used to reanimate (and in some cases consolidate) old misogynist beliefs about women’s perceived “place” in the home. In addition, pitting woman against woman in a fictional battle of mothering choices obscures the real issues affecting women in the 21st century, such as the lack of maternity leave, inadequate childcare provision, and equal pay and employment rights.

A brief history of the family in the media

The way parenting has been reported in the media has had a long and turbulent history with notions of the “ideal” family changing from one era to the next. We are familiar with the concept of the “traditional” family,—a stay-at-home mother supported by a male breadwinner—but where does this notion of the family actually come from? And does this familial grouping even exist except in the hearts and minds of advertisers, politicians, and the media? In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz writes about the concept of “traditional parenting,” in which the father, a strict patriarch, commanded total obedience from both his wife and children (10). This was in the pre-industrial era when children were the responsibility of both parents, their care woven into a family and work life that revolved around the home. Journalist and writer Judith Warner describes how the family underwent a major revolution during the late-eighteenth century when industrialisation dictated that men worked outside the home and new ideals of mother “as sacred teacher and moral guide came to American shores ... from England” (134). This new configuration soon brought anxieties about the changing nature of family life. It was at this time that the gendered division of labour gave birth to the male “breadwinner” role (“a masculine identity unheard of in the colonial days” [Coontz 10]) and the “Motherhood Religion,” which was conceived through “sermons and parenting books that made their way from England to American shores” (Warner 135). This new form of the family meant that fathers played very little part in their offspring’s upbringing, and “maternal guidance supplanted the patriarchal authoritarianism of the past” (Coontz 11).

It was this model of family life that spawned the Victorian cult of motherhood and, according to Warner, “compensated nicely for the fact that, in truth, middle-class married women simply didn’t have much else to do anymore” (135). But it was a model of domesticity that depended on legions of working-class women hired to service those households. According to Coontz, “Between 1800 and 1850, the proportion of servants to white households doubled, to about one in nine. Some servants were poverty-stricken mothers who had to board or bind out their own children” (11). The point is that the “Angel in the House” selflessly caring for her children has, since the nineteenth century, been the preserve of a privileged few reliant on numerous working mothers paid to service the households of the more fortunate classes.¹ In addition, there was an increase in child labour with children forced to work to supplement the family income, leading to calls for a retreat from the “harnessed” family model (in which a number of families were “harnessed” together in household production) to the “‘true American’ family—a restricted, exclusive nuclear unit in which women and children were divorced from the world of work” (Coontz 13). It was not long, however, before social reformers became increasingly concerned about the effect of new family configurations as middle-class families began to withdraw their children from the working world, and “observers began to worry that children were becoming *too* sheltered” (Coontz 12; emphasis in original).

Family life in the 1920s and 1930s came under scrutiny yet again, argues Coontz, as “social theorists noted the independence and isolation of the nuclear family with renewed anxiety” (13). The Boy Scout movement was purportedly formed in the 1920s with the explicit aim “to staunch the feminization of the American male by removing young men from the too-powerful female orbit” with Chief Scout Ernest Thompson Seton fearing that “boys were degenerating into ‘a lot of flat-chested cigarette-smokers, with shaky nerves and doubtful vitality’” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 84). The Chicago School of Sociology was amongst those that believed that the traditional family had been weakened by both urbanisation and immigration. While they may have welcomed the way companionate marriage ensured an increased democracy between the genders, “they worried about the rootlessness of nuclear families and the breakdown of older solidarities” (Coontz 13). By the time of the Great Depression and fuelled by the economic crisis, families were again forced to share living arrangements, and generations once again depended upon each other in a way lost to pre-Industrial times. One newspaper even opined that “[m]any a family that has lost its car has found its soul” (qtd. in Coontz 14). However, this rose-tinted nostalgia for a family bound together obviously hid the terrible truth of a life lived in grinding poverty as the depression took hold. Numerous accounts detail how family life all but broke down as “[m]en withdrew from family life or turned violent; women exhausted themselves trying to ‘take up the slack’ both financially and emotionally, or they belittled their husbands as failures; and children gave up their dreams of education to work at dead-end jobs” (qtd. in Coontz 14).

The dawn of the 1940s saw the popularity of psychoanalysts like Helene Deutsch who, building on the work of Sigmund Freud, theorised that good motherhood depended upon women rejecting “masculine wishes” and accepting their passive “feminine” role (Warner 73). For psychoanalysts, this notion of ideal or “complete motherliness” was crucial if children were not to be burdened by pathologies in their future lives. It was, however, a fine balancing act and dependent upon women not embracing mother love too completely—a view compounded by Philip Wylie’s now famous 1942 book, *Generation of Vipers*, in which he attacked America’s mothers for raising a nation of sons “unmanned” by excess maternal affection (194-217).

World War II provided an opportunity to study the results of this particular brand of “smother love” thanks to testing performed by Army psychologists, most notably the Selective Service Administration which reported that “[n]early one-fifth of all the men called up to serve in the war were either rejected or unable to complete their service for ‘neuropsychiatric reasons’” (Warner 73). Of course the reason for this was firmly placed at the feet of mothers who were blamed for over-protecting their sons, at least so thought Edward A Strecker, consultant to the surgeon general of the Army and Navy, and an adviser to the secretary of war (Warner 73). Strecker added his voice to those of Thompson Seton and Wylie and based on his war-time experiences, argued that the nation’s men had suffered negatively from the behaviour of women “whose maternal behaviour is motivated by the seeking of emotional recompense for the buffers which life has dealt her own ego.” A major fault of “mom,” he added, was that she had failed “in the elementary mother function of weaning her offspring emotionally as well as physically” (qtd. in Warner 74).

It was not long before magazine articles started to echo these sentiments, and in 1945 *Ladies’ Home Journal* published an article asking: “Are American Moms a Menace?” Author Amram Sheinfeld linked national security to the way in which mothers raised their children, arguing that: “mom is often a dangerous influence on her sons and a threat to our national existence” (qtd. in Warner 74). For Sheinfeld one way to counter the problem of neurotic mothers raising neurotic sons was for them to breastfeed “only as long as is absolutely necessary” (qtd. in Warner 74). But this was too late for many, as the author noted that Adolf Hitler was the “only son and spoiled darling of his not-too-bright mother” (qtd. in Warner 74). This sentiment was shared by authors Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F Farnham, who issued the following warning when studying despots like Hitler and Mussolini:

Biographers will, one day, we hope come to understand that their true subject is hardly the man (or woman) they have chosen to scrutinize ... but the mother or her substitute. Men, standing before the bar of historical judgment, might often well begin their defense with the words: “I had a mother” (qtd. in Warner 74)

The way mothers were increasingly blamed for the ills of society and negatively represented in magazine and newspapers famously came under the scrutiny of Betty Friedan in her now seminal text *The Feminine Mystique*. Arguing that there was a major change in the way women were represented between the 1940s and the 1950s, Friedan noted that the “New Women” of magazine stories published in the 1940s “were almost never housewives; in fact, the stories usually ended before they had children,” adding that these were the days before the term “career woman” became a dirty word in America” (35). Friedan surveyed publications such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* commencing in 1949 and notes that after the end of the war there was an increase in titles like: “Have Babies While You’re Young,” “Are You Training Your Daughter to be a Wife?,” “Careers at Home,” “Should I Stop Work When We Marry?,” and “The Business of Running a Home” (38). She argues that by the time the new decade dawned in 1950, there was a marked change in the way women were represented in magazines with “only one out of three heroines” being “a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife” (39). A decade later, in 1959, Friedan describes how she scoured “three major women’s magazines ... without finding a single heroine who had a career, a commitment to any work, art, profession, or mission in the world, other than “Occupation: housewife.” Only one in a hundred heroines had a job; even the young unmarried heroines no longer worked except at snaring a husband (39).

By the end of the decade Friedan argues that the happy heroine had disappeared from print altogether and was no longer represented as “a separate self and the subject of her own story,” but only as one half of a married couple (41). It was as if, driven from the workplace and having no independent narrative, women could only exist in the pages of publications like *McCalls*, living life through and for their husbands and, more importantly, their children.

As the career woman was slowly subsumed under her identity as wife and mother, the notion of “togetherness,” coined by the publishers of *McCalls* in the mid-1950s, became the watchword for family life. As Friedan notes, this was “a movement of spiritual significance [used] by advertisers, ministers, newspaper editors,” (41) and it trod a fine line between marital bliss and co-dependence:

Why, it was asked, should men with the capacities of statesmen, anthropologists, physicists, poets, have to wash dishes and diaper babies on weekday evenings or Saturday mornings when they might use those extra hours to fulfil larger commitments to their society? (Friedan 42)

Of course, no such questions were raised when it came to the squandering of women’s considerable skills. In spite of the fact that only 10 years earlier women had been deemed capable of holding down jobs and enjoying fulfilling careers, by the end of the 1950s this was considered outside of their realm, in magazine land at least.

Forced to vacate the jobs that they had filled during the war and having childcare support withdrawn, in addition to being inundated with magazine articles espousing the ideals of “happy housewife heroines,” it is easy to see how women began to compare themselves unfavourably to the domestic goddesses lauded by the popular press. If there is something familiar about the era of *The Feminine Mystique* it is because it was during this time that the image of the “traditional family” was created. According to Coontz, the idealised family that was conceived in the 1950s was formed from two opposing and, in many ways, mutually exclusive family ideals: the first (from the mid-19th century) favoured the strong mother-child bond, and the second (from the 1920s) focused “on an eroticized couple relationship, demanding that mothers curb emotional ‘overinvestment’ in their children” (9). Friedan admits that she *is* one of those female journalists that helped create this image of womanhood “designed to sell washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face-creams, hair tints” (63-4). And it should come as no surprise to learn that “the hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it” (Coontz 9).

Factor a job and childcare issues into this mix and it soon becomes clear that this romanticised ideal, so often used as an aspirational benchmark for modern mothers, was doomed to failure. It is a fact that, in the light of recent media reports, we would do well not to forget.

And then the backlash

And yet, looking back to this post World War II period, Faludi contends that while Friedan may have written about women being confined to the home, suffering from a “problem that has no name,” this bears little relation to the reality of women’s lives (*Backlash* 74), despite what books like *The Feminine Mystique* would have us believe. “While 3.25 million women were pushed or persuaded out of industrial jobs in the first year after the end of the Second World War,” argues Faludi, “2.75 million women were entering the work force at the same time” (*Backlash* 74). However, compared to the war years, women were entering more menial jobs than ever before and public opinion regarding their working outside the home had changed. Faludi contends the following:

The culture derided them; employers discriminated against them; government promoted new employment policies that discriminated against women; and eventually women themselves internalized the message that, if they must work, they should stick to typing. ... The fifties backlash, in short, didn't transform women into full-time “happy housewives”, it just demoted them to poorly paid secretaries. (*Backlash* 75)

In fact by 1947 women had managed to recoup the number of jobs lost to them in the immediate post-war years, with more women employed “by 1952 ... than at the height of the war” (Faludi, *Backlash* 75). According to media historians Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, by “1955, there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation’s previous history, and an increasing number of these were women with young children” (34). It is not difficult to see why Faludi asserts that it is “precisely women’s unrelenting influx into the job market, not a retreat to the home, that provoked and sustained the anti-feminist uproar” (*Backlash* 75). This is a claim borne out by the fact that, according to Judith Warner, “at the height of the period [which] we tend to think of as the at-home-mom Feminine Mystique years, one third of the workforce was female. About two-thirds of those working women were married, and more than half of those married women had children of preschool or school age” (137). By 1960 “40 percent of women were in the work force ... almost half were mothers of school-age children ... [and] the figures were even higher for African American women” (Douglas and Michaels 34-5). Statistics like these add weight to backlash arguments, particularly when read against stories in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Look* magazine complaining that women were grabbing “control of the stock market ... and ... advancing on ‘authority-wielding executive jobs’” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 85) presumably at the same time as they languished in their homes suffering from that “problem with no name.”

Looking at the 1980s backlash reporting it is clear that it presages the recent round of mommy wars, even if the battle did not commence fully until the past decade. Bearing in mind the logic behind backlash reporting, it should not be surprising that in December 1980 *The New York Times* ran the headline, “Many Young Women Now Say They’d Pick Family Over Career,” particularly when employment figures show that by “1984, 59 percent of married mothers worked ... [and] 46.8 percent of mothers with a child under one worked. Black married mothers were even more likely to be in the labor force than their white counterparts” (Douglas and Michaels 56). With nothing other than the opinion of one woman, Mary Anne Citrino, a Senior at Princeton, who told *The New York Times* that “when she marries and has her children ... she plans to quit whatever job she has for eight years to become a full-time mother” (Kleiman 1), the article asserted the following:

She is not alone. At a time when young women have more job opportunities and chances for advancement than ever, many of them now in college appear to be challenging the values of their predecessors. They are questioning whether a career is more important than having children and caring for them personally. (Kleiman 1)

The report instigated a few similar stories, but this reportage died down until midway through the 1980s when another news report surfaced that seemed to confirm the sentiments of the *New York Times* missive. Promulgated by former advertising executive Faith Popcorn, the idea that women

were abandoning careers post-childbirth and choosing “nesting” or “cocooning” over working outside the home gained popularity. Based on little evidence, apart from the “improving sales of ‘mom foods’, the popularity of ‘big comfortable chairs’, the ratings of the *Cosby* show, and one statistic” that “a third of all the female MBA [Master of Business Administration]s of 197[6]” had already returned home (qtd in Faludi, *Backlash* 109), and Popcorn’s prediction that women were abandoning the office quite quickly became reported as the latest trend.

Familiar as we are with trend reporting it is worth re-re-visiting the notion as it goes hand-in-hand with the way the mommy wars have been written about in both the British and American press. Trend journalism “attains authority not through actual reporting but through the power of repetition. Said enough times, anything can be made to seem true” (Faludi, *Backlash* 104). For example, Popcorn’s MBA figure was taken from a 1986 *Fortune* cover story called “Why Women Managers are Bailing Out,” a story based on the “cocktail chatter” of a couple of female graduates who were overheard talking about their intention to stay home and look after their babies. The story eventually went to print claiming that “After ten years, significantly more women than men dropped off the management track” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 111). *Fortune*’s senior reporter Alex Taylor III neglected to report, however, that 10 years after graduation “virtually the same proportion of women and men were still working for [the same] employers” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 110-111) and that even if 30 per cent of 1,039 women from the Class of ‘76 had dropped off the management track, so had 21 per cent of the men. Taylor’s “significantly more women” boiled down to very few, and given that women still bear most of the responsibility for childcare, the big news surely should be that the employment gap was so small.

Fastforward to 2001 and both American and British parents were horrified by newspaper reports of new US research, endorsed by a UK professor, arguing that even if parents chose very high quality childcare, it would be detrimental to children’s development (Summerskill and Helmore). The study involved only 1,300 children, but it caused enough of a furore in both British and American newspapers for one tabloid to proclaim that the “Mommy Wars” had broken out on both sides of the Atlantic. Two years later and, according to Faludi, the shockwaves of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre meant that America had become enfolded in an “era of neofifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood” (*The Terror Dream* 4); a perfect landscape in which to re-animate the thorny old issue of whether women should stay at home and look after their children or continue to work in high-pressure careers. *The New York Times*, with a history of this kind of reporting, was quick to publish “The Opt-Out Revolution,” which spoke of the pressures felt by mothers in the 21st century and like the women interviewed for their 1980 article, featured a select group of well educated women (Belkin). Each had received first degrees from Princeton and some had gone on to Columbia and Harvard and yet, like the women in the article 23 years previously, once children came along all of these women had decided to “opt-out” of high-flying careers in order to stay home. Journalist Linda Belkin may assert that this is not how it should have been and that the gains of second wave feminism should have meant that women become equal partners in law firms, heads of business, and deans and Vice-Chancellors of Universities, but on the evidence of the women interviewed for this article, once they had reached a certain point in their career, no matter how long they had left it to have children and how good their careers had been, women seemed to stall.

There was an overwhelming response to the story. So many “letters to the editor” were received that for the first time in its history, the paper ran the responses over a number of weeks.² Could it really be true that another generation of women were rejecting the workplace as if it was a real option? Even if third-wave feminism told us that equality and “girl power” was all about choice, surely there needs to be some kind of an acknowledgement that this is a choice that is historically born out of privilege and not one that many twenty-first century families can actually afford to choose, especially as the economy falters and more and more mothers must work. In keeping with the tenets of trend journalism, the “trend” that Belkin identified in her article was based on the comments of only eight Ivy League women, and despite her statistics about how many women

graduated in 2003 (the numbers are unsurprisingly up on 40 years ago), and even though she takes care to outline work done by social scientists on “how the workplace has failed women,” the relentless thrust of the article focuses on how women are “choosing” to stay home after childbirth and “opting out” of the workplace.

At least, this is what we are led to believe. Going back to the issues underlying trend journalism, it should be noted that the problem not only lies in the “spin” given to statistical evidence but the way, Faludi argues, that “[a] trend declared in one publication sets off a chain reaction, as the rest of the media scramble to get the story too. The lightning speed at which these messages spread has less to do with the accuracy of the trend than with journalists’ propensity to repeat one another” (*Backlash* 104).

It is fairly safe to say that the idea of professional mothers “opting out” of the workplace was stoked by the tone of the first few paragraphs of the “Opt-Out Revolution.” Towards the end of the article Belkin goes into detail about the complexity of women’s choices, how they are not set in stone, and how mothers most often have to perform a juggling act between home and work-life. In fact, rather than focusing on the differences between stay-at-home mothers and working ones, the article clearly articulates the real problem underlying women’s choices as to whether they would prefer to stay-at-home or work post childbirth—the lack of available maternity benefits and affordable childcare. It was not long before the American media jumped on the “opt-out” bandwagon and ran a great number of stories that not only supported Belkin’s claims, but also emphasized the alleged antagonisms between stay-at-home and working mothers. September 2005 and *The New York Times* added fuel to the fire with another story claiming that women at elite colleges were rejecting careers and choosing stay-at-home motherhood. The media focus on mothers rejecting good careers and embracing stay-at-home motherhood persisted and transmogrified into yet more stories about a full-out war between stay-at-home mothers and working ones.

In March 2010 it appeared as if the British media was set to go down the same route as *The Observer*’s Lucy Cavendish who, writing from the viewpoint of a “self-confessed ‘slack mother,’” reported “from the frontline on why motherhood has become such a hot topic.” Cavendish argued that past mothering choices had been simpler. “Upper-class mothers farmed their children out. Working-class mothers took them in.” There was no preoccupation with the health or happiness of children as they were “seen and not heard” and only since the Second World War had we become so obsessed with our children’s health and happiness that we hold mothers to account for their offspring’s psychological well-being. Indeed, for Cavendish, mothering has become “one of the most contentious issues around.” She illustrates this as follows:

Working mothers can’t stand stay-at-home mothers; older ones think their younger versions are too overindulgent. Those who choose not to have children are militant about those who end up having four or more. Hothousing mothers with their endless Kumon maths classes look down on the more laid-back ones who think children should do what they want, when they want.

As a result, according to Cavendish “there’s a war out there.” This is exacerbated by the fact that “working mothers ... spend most of their lives in a state of miserable guilt” looked down upon by a society that continues to laud “traditional” family groupings in which the mother stays at home and the father is the breadwinner.

Newspaper reports were beginning to sound depressingly familiar. For every story informing us that “[c]hildren of working mothers tend to have a less healthy lifestyle” (Hope), there is one reassuring us that “mothers can go back to work months after the birth of their child without the baby’s wellbeing suffering as a result” (McVeigh and Asthana). And the manner in which the press spins these reports has an increasingly negative effect on mothers who, according to Cavendish, use them to justify their own mothering choices, adding fuel to the fire of the media’s mommy wars. According to family therapist, Suzanne Fleetwood: “There is a competitive streak in this generation of middle-class parents ... many women have given up highly paid jobs to look after their children, and so their child becomes their job” (qtd. in Cavendish). One of the problems with this kind of highly competitive mothering—in today’s culture where mothers are held to

account for their children's psychological happiness—is that “if the mother is deemed as doing a ‘good job’, then all of her frustration at giving up the power she held . . . is worth it. If, however, her child turns out to be not very bright . . . then her fragile confidence will be shattered” (qtd. in Cavendish).

The not-so-hidden Agenda

This may well be true but it does not explain how newspaper headlines about choices made by women become translated into an outright rejection of feminism and a war between mothers. This issue is made clear in Miriam Peskowitz's 2005 publication *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* in which she argues that the mommy wars have turned motherhood into an identity issue and that this focus on “choice” “diminish[es] the parent problem by expressing it in the trivial terms of catfights” (6). No one even questions the gender bias that is reinforced in every news report interrogating the effect working mothers have on their children while disregarding the role fathers may play. For Peskowitz, there is something deplorable at the core of the media's mommy wars as she argues that “[f]ar from helping us understand the social and political stakes of motherhood, the media's Mommy Wars . . . transform[ed] parenting into a style war” (6). Moreover, it is a style war that has obscured the real issues facing working mothers—like those of the gender pay gap, the prohibitive cost of reliable childcare, and the continued reliance on women to not only look after the children, but to provide the majority of domestic support as well. A statistic evidenced by a 2002 study by Phyllis Moen, director of the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, puts the experiences of families into a wider context. Out of 1,000 married middle-class families surveyed, 40 percent had fallen back into the “neo-traditional” working pattern of mothers either staying at home with their children or working part-time and fathers taking the role of breadwinner. However, this is not because women necessarily wanted to leave their jobs once their children came along, but because, “Parents are at odds with the workplace, and mothers are bearing the brunt of this mismatch” (Peskowitz 70). In fact, as Peskowitz argues, “today's workplace makes it increasingly difficult for two people who are really committed to their jobs to also raise a family” (71).

The *Observer's* political editor, Gaby Hinsliff, amply demonstrates this point. Hinsliff gave up her highly pressurised role as a journalist after giving birth to her first child. This was less about a choice than it was about the impossibility of combining two equally demanding roles. Hinsliff's account is illuminating, as she writes: “Surrender steals up on the working mother like hypothermia takes a stranded climber: the chill deepens day by day, disorientation sets in, and before you know it you are gone.” Her article makes it clear that she did not feel that she had made a free choice to give up her full-time job, or one based on a need to spend 24-hours a day with her child, but a Hobson's choice made within the constraints of a system that “pulls fathers into the ideal worker role and mothers into lives framed around caregiving.” It is a sentiment shared by the Distinguished Professor of Law, Joan C Williams, who argues that the persistent gendered wage gap exists because the structure of the workplace perpetuates the economic vulnerability of those caring for others, particularly mothers. In fact, for Williams, the organisation of the market place and family work leaves women with only two options:

They can perform as ideal workers without the flow of family work and other privileges male ideal workers enjoy. That is not equality. Or they can take dead-end mommy-track jobs or “women's work.” That is not equality either. A system that allows only these two alternatives is one that discriminates against women. (39)

We would do well to heed the words of Williams when she tells us that one of the main problems facing post-feminist women this century is “less about the obstacles faced by women than [...] about the obstacles faced by mothers” (qtd. in Belkin). It is a point well made and highlighted in every news report about smart, independent women “choosing” to walk away from their careers after childbirth.

The spin in the tale

The Observer's 2001 article warned readers not to panic about stories regarding the possible detrimental effect of childcare on their children as authors Summerskill and Helmore argue that "the research trumpeted around the world might not be right". The story behind the story was that figures are "spun" to accommodate the views of journalists, politicians, and cultural commentators alike. It seems that even academics are not above adding an inflection of their own as many of the co-researchers involved in this particular study quickly distanced themselves from Professor Jay Belsky, the Birkbeck academic who endorsed its findings. Summerskill and Helmore argue that this is "not the first time that millions of parents have been terrified by claims from apparently reputable researchers," but there is some surprise that this time it is a respected academic that has "hijacked" the story and interpreted the findings "in a way that will advance his anti-childcare agenda". Leading statistician on the study, Margaret Burchinal, goes so far as to say that "Belsky interprets the findings very differently from us ... Our results do not actually support his conclusions" (qtd. in Summerskill and Helmore.). This is a statement that should have served as a warning in the ensuing decade of "mommy wars" inspired newspaper reports and more particularly in the light of the director of Daycare Trust, Stephen Burke's, reassurance that "based on evidence in this country, ... good quality childcare has benefits for children, not just in terms of learning, but in terms of positive behaviour" (qtd in Summerskill and Helmore).

Back in April 2007 *The Washington Post* published an article revealing that "The ballyhooed Mommy Wars exist mainly in the minds—and the marketing machines— of the media and publishing industry, which have been churning out mom vs. mom news flashes since, believe it or not, the 1950s" (Graff). The story argues that despite claims to the contrary, "75 percent of mothers with school-age children are on the job. Most work because they have to. And most of their stay-at-home peers don't hold it against them" (Graff). *The Washington Post* went even further, however. They exposed yet another agenda behind the mommy wars, revealing that battleground terminology, which has nothing to do with mothering, was being deliberately used to manipulate readers into buying newspapers. According to E. J. Graff, "everyone knows that a war, any war, is good for the news business," and for author Caryl Rivers, the additional turn of the screw is that it is well known that "middle and upper-middle class women are a demographic that responds well to anxiety"(qtd in Graff). With this in mind, it is easy to see how telling women "that working will damage their marriages, harm their health and ruin their children" encourages them to "buy your magazine, click on your Web site, blog about your episode and write endless letters to the editor" (qtd in Graffn. pag.).

The *Washington Post* may well argue that the mommy wars were just a cynical ploy to sell newspapers, magazines, and books, but the truth is that it also successfully distracted mothers from the real issues at stake. This fact had been exposed in 2001 by *The Observer* when Stephen Burke stated that research like that propagated by Belsky not only causes parents to worry about the choices they are making, but he also went on to explain the following:

[It] can be used to promote an agenda which contradicts the reality of women with young children playing a bigger and bigger role in the workplace. It would be far better to provide affordable childcare which enables them to do their job and give their children a good start in life. This issue is about dealing with the reality of life today rather than some fictional world of yesteryear (qtd in Summerskill and Helmore).

It is a point well made, particularly in the light of differences between British and American maternity benefits. In Britain women are eligible for up to 52 weeks maternity leave, and either eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay for a maximum of 39 weeks or Maternity Allowance of £136.78 per week (or 90% of the average weekly earnings – whichever is lower) for up to 39 weeks. We may well pay more for childcare than the rest of Europe but British mothers still do well compared to America, which has the worst maternity benefits in the Western world with no paid leave for mothers in any segment of the work force and only 12 weeks unpaid leave in companies with 50 or more employees. In fact, America's maternity allowance is so poor that it is in the company of only 3 other nations worldwide—Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland. And yet despite this, both American and British mothers work because, like the majority of

women with children, they cannot afford not to. Even without the devastating effects of the recent global recession, as Coontz notes, “More than one-third of all two parent families today would be poor if both parents did not work” (260). While there are, of course, women who do voluntarily choose to stay at home after childbirth and make all kinds of sacrifices in order to bring up their children (and this paper is not a criticism of that choice), it should be clear that the rhetoric of choice used by the mommy-wars reports does little to expose the constraints placed on women that need to work after childbirth, or indeed choose to go back into the labour market, and the lived realities behind those decisions.

Conclusion: Part 1

On 8 March 2012, International Women’s Day, the achievements of women and the equality they enjoy in the workplace and society should have been celebrated. The day began depressingly, however, with Polly Toynbee’s column in *The Guardian* confirming that women’s rights are slowly being eroded not only here, but also in America. According to Toynbee, “International Women’s Day marks the first era in living memory that the equality drive has gone into reverse” (“Calm down dears?”)—a claim confirmed by leading British equal opportunities campaigner The Fawcett Society. The gender pay gap may have been reported as narrowing to 10 per cent in Britain, but this is only for women in their twenties. When it comes to British women with children that pay gap remains huge at 21 per cent (Thomas). Even if the pay gap has shrunk to only 10 per cent, should we really be celebrating being valued 10 per cent less than our male counterparts and when it comes to women with children, 21 per cent less? In bald terms, for every £100 that a man earns, mothers are paid £79. If one adds to this the increase in childcare costs in Britain and the cut in childcare credits under the latest austerity measures, it is clear that British mothers are suffering economically. Single mothers are discriminated against even more by losing childcare “services equivalent to 18.5 [per cent] of their income” (Asthana) while, at the same time being paid even less than their male counterparts—£194.4 compared to £346 for men (Fawcett Society 2011).

Figures show that there are still an estimated 30,000 women a year losing their jobs as a result of pregnancy in Britain (Fawcett Society). Women with children are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of law breaking discrimination with “more than a third of bosses—38 per cent—worry[ing] that mothers will not work as hard as others and admitting to not employing them” (Doughty). Does it not then seem disingenuous for family expert Jill Kirby, writing for the Centre for Policy Studies (the think tank and adviser to the British Conservative Government), to argue that this “has nothing to do with discrimination,” but is due to “the fact that women become less committed to the workplace at the point in their lives when they have children, ... They want to spend more time with their children, and regard lower pay as a trade-off for family time” (qtd. in Thomas). Underlying the mommy wars and the endless newspaper reports about whether women should work post-childbirth or not, is this notion of choice—a notion that is embraced by some in their need to feel empowered against widespread economic and workplace discrimination. But this rhetoric of choice obscures the real economic facts confronting women and mothers, particularly in the face of the recent global recession, the resulting austerity measures, and the historic gendering of childcare. The decision to be a stay-at-home mother or a working one is not black and white and not a choice for all as women struggle on unequal salaries, juggling badly paid part-time work and family, and shouldering an unenviable portion of domestic and childcare responsibilities.

In addition, policy decisions do not only impact on women and mothers, but on families and the future economy. As more and more couples delay starting a family and families increasingly choose to have fewer children, it will impact even more on an ageing population that depends upon the younger generation for support. This fact is made clear by Toynbee when she states that family friendly policies may be seen as lollipops for women voters, but are, in fact, an economic necessity (“Calm down dear?”). Governments on both sides of the Atlantic would be wise not to ignore this as, according to Toynbee, “Making it easy for women to combine work and family is

essential for the nation's standard of living: babies are a long-term economic necessity too. Countries that make combining both easy, do best" ("Calm down dear?").

Conclusion: Part 2

March 2013 and it looked like the mommy wars had leapt into action once again. Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing host of the highest-rated and most listened to talk-radio show in America, used his platform to disparage feminism and feminists (or, the feminazis, as he calls them) for having been wrong all these years. Limbaugh's outburst came directly on the heels of the publication of a *New York Magazine* article claiming that feminists are turning their backs on careers and independence once they have children (Miller).

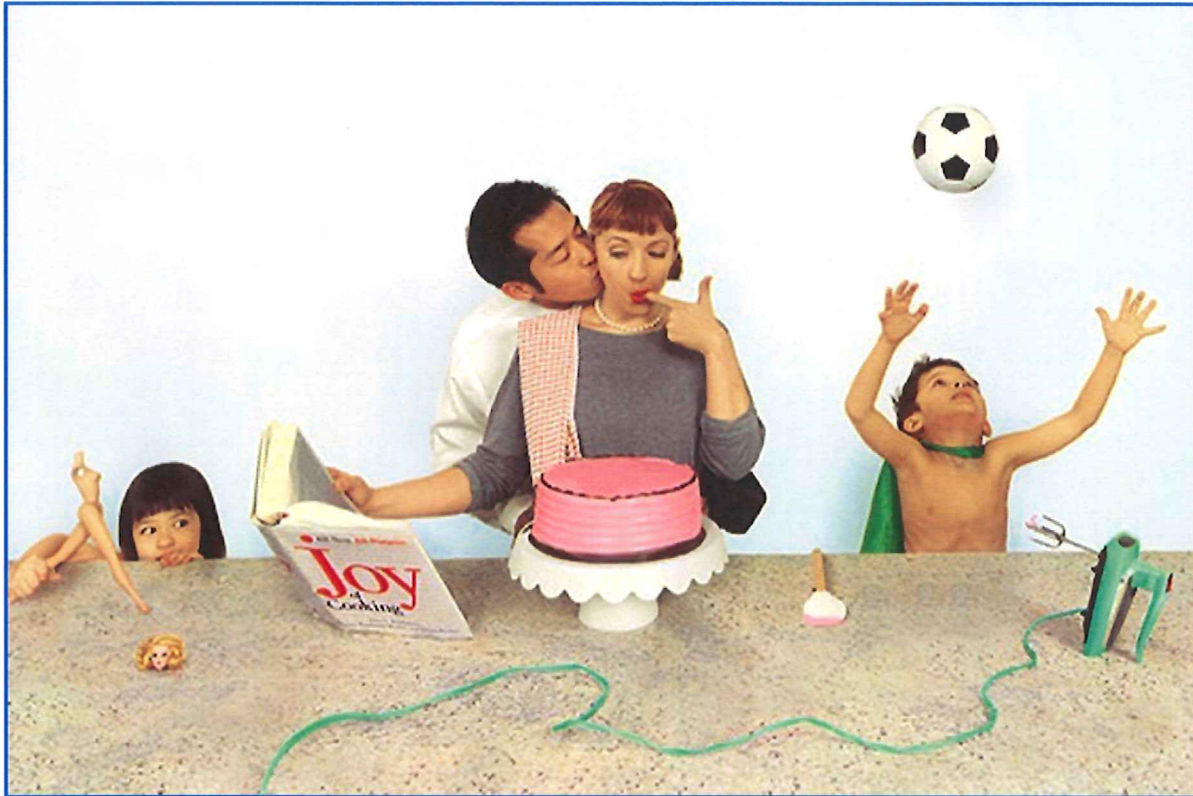


Fig.

1

The Daily Mail demonstrated how trend reporting is alive and well, only this time on a global scale, when it ran a report on the *New York Magazine* story claiming that, "a new wave of feminists are giving up their careers to stay at home because they WANT to" ("Rise of the Happy Housewife"). This latest round was allegedly kicked off by the publication of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* and a *MORE* magazine poll, which strove to reveal the root cause of the mommy wars.



Fig. 2

Unsurprisingly, this latest round of reporting obfuscates many of the facts in an almost hysterical need to decry feminism and everything it stands for. Although the *New York Magazine* makes clear that the mommy wars continue to be the domain of the privileged few that are economically able to make a “choice,” this fact is skated over in the subsequent reports. While not all of the stay-at-home mothers admit to feminism, neither do they decry the movement, and yet, what is repeatedly emphasised in these articles is how women are turning their backs on feminism as they eagerly choose childcare over a career, as if feminism ever told women that looking after children was not part of the deal.

We need to be evermore alert to what is being reported in the media and why. These “back to the home” newspaper reports depend upon a tradition of mother-centred childcare, but it is clear that images of the “traditional” stay-at-home mother and breadwinner father peddled in the media come straight out of an idealised past. If it is true that the media has been in the throes of a post 9/11 reaction, a throwback to Friedan’s fifties, “cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom’s childhood,” then it is easy to see how the notion of opting out could seem so attractive (Faludi, *The Terror Dream* 4). As appealing as this *Leace it to Beaver* style dream seems, with its longing for clearly defined male and female roles and where women do not have to juggle maternity leave and childcare with the relentless demands of paid commercial work, we have to be clear that this is exactly what it is: nostalgia for a bygone time when “unusual economic and political alignments” meant that families had real hope that their economic fortunes would improve (Coontz 263). Even so, any nostalgia for a traditional stay-at-home mother has to be based on inequality and a loss of economic and societal power for women, however much it is dressed up in the rhetoric of choice.

Image Notes

Fig. 1 Miller, Lisa. “The Retro Wife: Feminists who say they’re having it all – by choosing to stay home.” *New York Magazine* 17 Mar. 2013. 2 May 2013 <<http://nymag.com/news/features/retro-wife-2013-3/>>.

Fig. 2 *Daily Mail* Reporter, "Rise of the happy housewife: How a new wave of feminists are giving up their careers to stay at home because they WANT to." *Mail Online* 18 Mar. 2012. 2 May 2013 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2295236/Rise-happy-housewife-How-new-wave-feminists-giving-careers-stay-home-WANT-to.html>>.

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Endnotes

¹. As Alison Woolf argues in *The XX Factor: How Working Women are Creating a New Society*, this is truer than ever in the 21st century where professional or “career” women depend on paid childcare provided by their less well-educated and poorer paid sisters.

². From two to four, depending on which newspaper report is to be believed.

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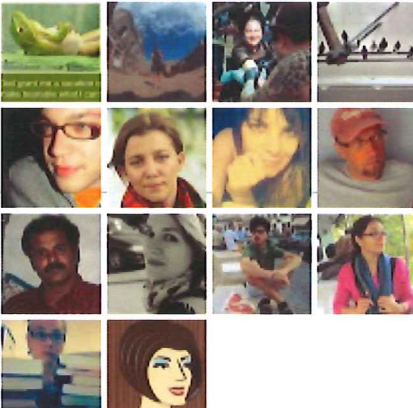
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