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The Gendered Politics of a Global Recession: A News Media Analysis

With an eye on the global recession and as recent austerity measures really begin to bite, the UK's leading campaigner for gender equality, The Fawcett Society, has argued that it is women that stand to suffer the most with 'some £5.8 billion of the £8 billion of cuts planned [being] taken from women's pockets' (Diversitylink 2011). The latest report from the Office of National Statistics spells out the miserable truth: cuts to local services in England and Wales have resulted in women's jobs accounting for some '66.4% of the total drop in employment in councils (85.710 female job losses out of 129.051 total council jobs)' (Office of National Statistics, in Fawcett Society 2011b). In fact the Fawcett Society is so convinced that the potential for equal employment and pay between genders is reaching a crisis point that in November 2011 the organisation stepped up its usual low key campaigning and, 'in its first "call to arms" in nearly a century-and-a-half of activism', arranged a day of action (Davies 2011). In a week where it was claimed that women's unemployment had hit a new high of 1.09 million, the Fawcett Society urged women to don rubber gloves, 50s dress and headscarves and take to the streets in an attempt to draw attention to the way the Government's austerity measures are eroding equal employment rights and turning back time on women's rights. At that time Anna Bird, The Fawcett Society's Acting Chief Executive warned that, as a society, we had reached a watershed in which 'the impact of austerity has brought us to a tipping point where, while we have got used to steady progress towards greater equality, we're now seeing a risk of slipping backwards' (quoted in Davies 2011).

On the other side of the Atlantic, the economic downturn has been widely reported to have turned a differently gendered course and, according to the media, has 'taken a disproportionate toll on male employment' (Proudfoot 2010, p.C5). In June 2010, a 'Statistics Canada' report was published stating that 'male-dominated industries such as construction, manufacturing and transport [have been] hit hardest' with 'more than four in five jobs lost in the previous six months [...] held by men' (Proudfoot 2010, p.C5). Dubbed the 'he-cession' by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, North American and Canadian newspapers soon began running stories about the latest gender crisis, claiming that traditional notions of working class masculinity, most notably men's ability to support a family, their 'breadwinner'

status, were ‘under siege’ with men now becoming ‘an endangered species’ (Proudfoot 2010, p.C5). Combined with other social changes, such as ‘de-industrialization’ and ‘the loss of manufacturing jobs’, this latest assault on masculinity has, according to Assistant Professor Christopher J Greig, created ‘anxieties around what it means to be a man at this particular moment’ and has not only ‘intensified [...] concerns as men [...] lost their role as the breadwinner’ (in Proudfoot 2010, p.C5) but has led to North American newspapers being full of ‘an anti-feminist backlash’ where ‘men pine for a return to “the good old days” when men were men – and when women, presumably, knew their place’ (in Walter 2010).

On the face of it at least, the consequences of the downturn in Britain and America seem contradictory. Whereas British newspaper reports claim that, ‘Cuts to public services are pushing the fight for gender equality into reverse’ (Asthana 2010) with ‘the coalition [...] happy to restore an outdated “male breadwinner, dependent female carer” model of family life’ (Asthana 2010), American news reports have focused firmly on how the impact of male unemployment is leading to divorce and the breakdown of the family (Nauert 2011). While the British press talks about women willingly returning to their ‘traditional’ roles in the home, US newspapers report on how the upsurge in female employment is having a negative impact upon the ‘conventional’ family. Can it really be true that the recent recession and resulting austerity measures are having such a diverse and radical effect on American and British families? Are American men truly suffering massive job losses while British women are seeing their employment opportunities eroded? Or is this latest round of reporting just another attempt to coerce families into a ‘traditional’, idealised and heteronormative configuration at the expense of women’s equality within the workplace?ⁱ Taking my lead from Natasha Zaretsky’s account of how the American family has historically been aligned with fears of national decline, I shall argue that the white, middleclass family more than ever stands at the epicentre of perceived threats, not only to the very capitalist system that defines it, but also to one that underlies social, legal, political and economic systems worldwide—Patriarchy.

If, as Assistant Professor Christopher J Greig has argued, changes resulting from de-industrialisation and mass unemployment have left 21st century men ‘expressing a longing for a return to old-style values’ (in Walter 2010) and triggered another round of backlash against feminism, then it will be instructive to consider Susan Faludi’s examination of backlash reporting contained in both the British and American media of the 1980s. If her assertion that the 1980s recession saw women’s equality become so threatening that ‘its slightest shadow threaten[ed] to erase male identity’ (Faludi 1992, p.87) then it will be useful to compare this

against the present economic background which is uncannily similar to the: ‘decade in which factory closures put blue-collar men out of work by the millionⁱⁱⁱ’ (Faludi 1992, p.87). My critical analysis of the way British and American newspapers report on the gendered impact of austerity, focuses on what Faludi terms ‘trend journalism’, a style of writing which ‘professes to offer “news” of changing mores, yet prescribes more than it observes’ (Faludi 1992, p.103). According to Faludi, 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 1992, p.104).

My reading of the US print media mainly focuses on *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic* and *The Huffington Post*; much of the British analysis will centre on right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail* and left-wing broadsheet *The Guardian*. Focusing on the reporting contained in these particular publications will allow me to explore the tense and contradictory relationship within these news reports between ‘empirical sources’, which are cited as evidence for their claims, and the gendered inflection given to their reporting. What I am suggesting here is that newspaper articles repeatedly ‘spin’ academic and policy orientated research in the formation of ‘backlash’ narratives that are then used to explain the deepening inequalities and discrimination experienced by women. This is particularly evident in recent recession reporting and its impact on the workplace as job-losses by men (as described by the North American press) are specifically spun to emphasize a perceived crisis in masculinity, a loss of ‘breadwinner’ status, while in Britain women’s job losses, particularly those of mothers, is described as ‘positive choice’ with women returning to a more ‘natural’ state of domesticity. This article will argue that both the North American and British press are in the throes of yet another backlash against feminism and that this gendered and family oriented reporting obfuscates more pressing issues such as the impact of austerity measures upon those living on the poverty line – black and working class families.

i

Backlash then ...

According to historian Natasha Zaretsky, the mid 1970s, saw American journalists, policymakers and politicians warning that ‘the “American Century” was coming to a premature and ignoble end, and that the nation had entered an era of decline’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.1). The costly failure of America’s intervention in Vietnam, the fallout from Watergate, the OPEC oil embargo, civil unrest (the tumultuous events of 1968) and the resulting economic

recession, coupled with the sense that America was losing its dominant place in the world order, resulted in the country entering into an era of intense cultural introspection with the nuclear family becoming synonymous with the ‘aspirations of the American Century’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.6). The recession of 1974-5 had resulted in widespread male unemployment and, according to Zaretsky, fears over a new kind of masculinity within the workplace: ‘the freewheeling, antiauthoritarian new worker gave way to that of the fallen male breadwinner, emasculated by plant-closings and corporate downsizing’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.137). At the same time attention was trained on the rise of two-earner families and the changes in gender roles that were partly attributed to new social movements like feminism and gay liberation which were seen to undermine the family’s normative heterosexual configuration (Zaretsky 2007, p.2). Media accounts ‘focused on the deleterious effects of downsizing and plant closings on the nation’s male industrial workers’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.138) and it was widely reported that unemployment had a far worse psychological effect on men than on women (Zaretsky 2007, p.138).ⁱⁱⁱ

In many ways the events of the late 1970s provide a context for attitudes towards the family, and gender roles regularly found in newspaper reporting since then, particularly those media accounts that portray the unemployed man as ‘rudderless and emasculated, his family torn apart by a sudden and unexpected economic vulnerability that not only robbed him of his livelihood but added insult to injury by forcing his wife out of the home and into the workforce’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.138). With both Britain and America arguably still suffering the effects of the past decade – the stockmarket crash of 2000, the terrible events of 9/11, the resulting war on terror and the latest global recession – it is not surprising that newspaper reporting on austerity measures and the family are noticeably similar to those of the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, as shown by financial analyst Doug Wakefield’s research into the stock market crash of 2008, there are many parallels that can be drawn between the build up to both the 1987 and 2008 recessions (Wakefield 2008). His conclusion is that, as a society, we would do well to learn the lessons of financial history in order to avoid its future pitfalls – a lesson that should also be heeded when considering the gendered bias contained in newspaper reporting on the effects of the recession in both North America and Britain.

Faludi’s 1992 book convincingly argued that from time immemorial the feminist movement had been held to account for ‘nearly every woe besetting women, from mental depression to meagre savings accounts, from teenage suicides to eating disorders to bad complexions’ and that this anti-feminist backlash followed a pattern (Faludi 1992, p.3). A

pattern that, according to American studies scholar Cynthia Kinnard, can be seen in the ‘anti-feminist literature, [and] journalistic broadsides against women’s rights [which] ‘grew in intensity during the late 19th century and reached regular peaks with each new suffrage campaign’ (in Faludi 1992, p.103). In fact the history of backlash is not unique to America or even to recent history as, according to Faludi, every time women achieve a modicum of success in their battle for equality, a backlash occurs. A phenomenon that can even be dated 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’ (Faludi 1992, p.67).

Looking back to the post World War II era, for example, Faludi tells us that the ‘much publicized homebound image of the fifties woman bore little relation to her actual circumstances’ (Faludi 1992, p.74). Cautioning us to be wary - even of seminal texts like Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, with their focus on the plight of bored and depressed white, middle-class, women - Faludi reveals that: ‘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, 2.75 million women were entering the work force at the same time’ (Faludi 1992, p.74). Despite Friedan’s focus on the ‘problem that has no name’ the underlying and relatively un-reported problem was, argues Faludi, that women were entering more menial jobs than ever before, admin and clerical positions that were lower down the salary scale and with little or no career prospects. And while it is true that 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 1992, p.74), public opinion toward women working outside the home had changed:

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 (Faludi 1992, p.75).

This change of perception towards working women and the anti-feminist uproar that ensued was, argues Faludi, fuelled by women’s ‘unrelenting influx into the job market, not a retreat to the home’ (Faludi 1992, p.75) a complex cultural contradiction acknowledged by Faludi but seemingly overlooked by Friedan. A claim supported by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels who assert that, ‘by 1955, there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation’s previous history [...] by 1960, 40 percent of women were in the work force (Douglas

and Michaels 2004, p.34). A state of affairs that led to hyperbolic reporting in publications like *The Wall Street Journal* and *Look* magazine claiming that women ‘had grabbed control of the stock market [...] and [...] were advancing on “authority-wielding executive jobs”’ (in Faludi 1992, p.85). Presumably at the same time as they retreated into the home – multi-tasking as they went.

ii

... and now

By the end of the 1980s, according to Faludi, recession polls revealed that men were of the opinion that the women’s movement had ‘made things harder for men at home’ (Faludi 1992, p.83) and that the family should be ‘traditional’ (Faludi 1992, p.82). Opinions that, according to Faludi, are nothing new as evidenced by the warnings of social anthropologist Margaret Meade who, back in 1949, cautioned that ‘maleness in America is not absolutely defined; it has to be kept and reearned every day, and one essential element in the definition is beating women in every game that both sexes play’ (in Faludi 1992, p.83). A belief that is further supported by sociologist William Goode who confirms that as the century has unfolded men have become more and more bothered by feminism and have regarded ‘even small losses of deference, advantages, or opportunities as large threats’ (in Faludi 1992, p.83). If, as Faludi argued in 1992, ‘establishing masculinity depends most of all on succeeding as the prime breadwinner’ (Faludi 1992, p.87) then it is not difficult to comprehend the impact on masculinity that is compounded with each recession and each round of job losses. Particularly bearing in mind attitudes unearthed in the Yankelovich Monitor survey, which, over a twenty-year period leading up to the 1980s, found that the leading definition of masculinity for men overwhelmingly remains ‘being a good provider for his family’ (Faludi 1992, p.87).

Recalling the way newspapers reported the physical and psychological decline of unemployed men in the 1970s recession is instructive here as journalists asserted that the ‘physical impact of the plant closings on newly unemployed men found that they disproportionately suffered from increased rates of alcoholism, mental illness, suicide, heart disease, ulcers, and sexual impotence’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.138). Some thirty years later recent North American media reports have taken the same route by claiming that: “‘the financial strain of unemployment’ is worse for the mental health of men than women’ with lengthy ‘periods of unemployment [being] a strong predictor of heavy drinking, especially for men ages 27 to 35’ (Salam 2009). According to journalists such as Salam the lack of prospects for

the white male is already leading to, among many other social problems, a decrease in the amount of marriages on offer to 27-35 year-olds (Salam 2009). Adding fuel to this particular fire is the prediction that this crisis is already beginning to unfold in the American working class family which 'is slowly turning into a matriarchy, with men increasingly absent from the home and women making all the decisions' (Rosin 2010). In addition, according to Rosin, this is a pattern that has already been seen in the families of 'lower-class African Americans: the mothers pull themselves up, but the men don't follow. First-generation college-educated white women may join their black counterparts in a new kind of middle class, where marriage is increasingly rare' (Rosin 2010). Again this is nothing new as this particular fear had already been voiced during the 1970s when, according to Zaretsky, the 'anxiety that middle- and upper-class families were coming to resemble their poorer counterparts was accompanied by the related fear that the ostensibly stable divide between white and black families were breaking down' (Rosin 2010, p.13). Quite apart from the ramifications of this kind of attitude towards racial segregation (imagined or not) it seems that the US print media would have us believe that, due to the latest global recession, the white middle-class North American family is in the midst of a crisis of seismic proportions. Unbeknownst to the general reader, however, this crisis is nothing new and has been repeated each time a recession hits the industrial sector.

This view is compounded by journalists such as Caryl Rivers who claims that 'whenever white men can't get jobs – or can't get the jobs they feel they are entitled to, and when they imagine "others" taking those jobs, there is often hell to pay' (Rivers 2010). It maybe women, and feminists in particular, that are at the receiving end of male anger nowadays but a cursory look at the history of populist rage, according to Rivers, reveals the 'incendiary situation' that inevitably arises when white men cannot get employed. A situation that reportedly leads to: 'Angry, unemployed white men tend[ing] to look around and blame blacks, Hispanics, immigrants and others for taking "their" jobs – even when minority men are unemployed at a high rate as well' (Rivers 2010). The popular American press may well warn that: 'If ever there was a crisis of masculinity, we have one now' (Rivers 2010) but studies reveal that the real crisis is actually among those black or Hispanic working class men who are finding it even more impossible to get re-employed than their white counterparts. A view supported by the September 2012 publication of a Labor Department report stating that even though unemployment rates for white working class men were beginning to fall, black unemployment had 'surged to 16.7% in August, its highest level since 1984' (U.S. Dept of

Labor 2012, p.3). And yet, this focus on black male unemployment and white middle class gender issues overlooks yet another gender twist: black working class women have higher employment rates (53.8 percent) than both their black male (approximately 50 percent) and white female (46 percent) counterparts. Maybe the fact that they only earn '\$0.91 to every dollar earned by black men' and 77 percent less than white men (U.S. Dept of Labor 2012, p.1) means that, for the American press at least, black working women do not constitute much of a threat to white masculinity and therefore do not make good copy for the US newshounds.

iii

The 'traditional' British family

It would seem that recession reporting in Britain, on the other hand, positively thrives on notions of the 'traditional family' despite newspaper reports telling of: 'More than a million women [...] now unemployed [...] the highest number in nearly a quarter of a century and a rise of 91,000 over last year' (Barrow 2012). On top of the redundancies, cuts in services, childcare and benefits, as well as the government's decision to employ an 80/20 ratio of spending cuts to tax rises and, unlike reports from the rest of the world, it is Britain's women that seem to be suffering the effects of the austerity measures more than their sisters worldwide. And yet despite the overwhelming evidence of female unemployment, newspapers have continued to report that the gender pay gap is closing and that the battle for workplace equality is won. In fact policy advisors such as Dr Catherine Hakim have gone so far as to suggest that: 'equal opportunity policies, in regards to women's access to the labour market in the UK, have been successful' (Hakim 2011).

Hakim, a controversial figure who is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies (which advises on Government policy), is famous for her formulation of 'preference theory' which, unlike most other studies, including the European Social Survey,^{iv} does not take into account how patriarchal ideology impacts upon choices available to women. Despite Hakim's claim that her study is academic, with all the related connotations of objectivity and rigorous peer review, it is clear that her formulation of 'preference theory' underlies much of the report submitted to the Government and informs such policy statements as: 'most men and women have different career aspirations and priorities. Men and women often have different life-goals and policy makers should therefore not expect the same job outcomes' (Hakim 2011). Considering that the Equal Opportunities Commission

(EOC), after undertaking a two-year study into pregnancy discrimination at work, came to the conclusion that the situation was much worse than they had expected, that an estimated 30,000 women a year lose their jobs as a result of pregnancy and the fact that women with children are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of renewed (and law breaking) discrimination (EOC 2005) it seems disingenuous for Hakim to claim that: ‘Sex differentials in the professions are due primarily to substantively different work orientations and career choices among men and women’ (Hakim 2011). It is equally disingenuous for author, family expert and policy analyst Jill Kirby to argue that this disparity in the workplace ‘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’” (in Thomas 2011).

If, as the *Daily Mail* informs us, the amount of unemployed women has indeed reached its highest level since 1987 (Parsons and Barrow 2012), and cognizant of the agenda of Government policy advisors, how can we then be reassured by Hakim’s claim that: ‘Women today have more choices than men, including real choices between a focus on family work and/or paid employment’ (Hakim 2011). Right-wing tabloids may blithely tell us that legions of working women are happily giving up their careers in order to become full-time mothers, that older mothers are fuelling the biggest ever post World War II baby boom (Doughty 2012) and that women are increasingly ‘choosing to be stay-at-home mothers’ (Allen 2011) but is it really a choice when the stark truth is that working tax credits, which used to cover 80 per cent of childcare costs, have been cut to 70 per cent in a country that has nearly the most expensive childcare in the world? Add to that the devastating effect that benefit cuts are having on single parent families who are not only losing ‘services equivalent to 18.5% of their income’ (Women’s Budget Group 2010) but are being paid considerably less than their childless counterparts (£474 mean income per week compared to £674 for single adult in work) (Cribb et al. 2012, p.25) and it is clear that the latest recession will not only have a major impact on children and families but will also have a lasting affect on ‘women’s long-term career prospects’ (Allen 2011).

The sting in the tale ...

In 2009 President Obama reportedly predicted that Americans would have to learn to adapt to a new economy that may favour women who are ‘just as likely to be the primary bread earner, if not more likely, than men are today’ (in Salam 2009). Newspaper reports at that time were full of warnings that men were failing to acquire the qualifications necessary for ‘success in the knowledge-based economies that will rule the post-recession world’ with a ratio of three female college graduates predicted for every two males (Rosin 2011). Men reputedly began moving into areas such as the ‘private education and health-care industries – economic bright spots of the past two years’ with careers such as nursing seeing an increase of 10 per cent of male applications as well as a 125 per cent increase in men studying pharmacy technology (Irwin and Dennis 2011). But they would do well to look at the current state of employment in Britain as, according to a recent Pew research study, men in the US are now ‘faring far better than women in the recession recovery’ gaining 768,000 jobs with women losing 218,000 in the period from June 2009 to May 2011 (Lin 2011). In fact, the figures maybe even worse than that as, according to Gary Steinberg, spokesman for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, ‘Between January 2009 and March 2012 men lost 57,000 jobs, while women lost 683,000 jobs. This is the reverse of the recession period of December 2007-June 2009 (with an overlap of six months), which saw men lose 5,355,000 jobs and women lose 2,124,000 jobs’ (Bureau of Labor Statistics in *Tampa Bay Times* 2012). Underlying this reverse in fortunes is the fact that, according to Gary Burtless, a labour market expert with the Brookings Institution, during the recession, ‘Industries where women are more likely to be employed – education, health, the government – fared better in terms of job loss. In fact, health and education employment continued to grow in the recession and in the subsequent recovery. Government employment only began to fall after the private economy (and private employment) began growing again’ (in *Tampa Bay Times* 2012).

Turning back to the British economy, recent newspaper reports confirm that the recovery is taking much the same shape in Britain as, while unemployment rates have allegedly fallen by 20,000 ‘over the past year, the number of unemployed women rose by 42,000’ (Allen 2011). At the same time ‘at the height of the recession, unemployment among men increased much more than among women’ and it is only the recent welfare reforms that have had a disproportionate impact on women (Allen 2011). Something that our American friends would do well to heed in the light of the latest round of US job cuts which has,

according to a Pew Research Centre report, seen ‘local governments [...] slashing their majority-female workforces’ (Kochhar 2011). Arguably the ‘he-cession’ got a disproportionate amount of reporting compared to the amount of coverage given to the ‘tens of thousands of schoolteachers and other civil servants [who] have been laid off’ in the past year (Kochhar 2011). The recovery looks to be on more or less the same trajectory on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, despite the difference in emphasis of British and American news reports over the past few years, the facts underlying the trajectory of the gendered nature of job losses and gains appear remarkably similar after all.

v

... And the sting in the tail

One of the reoccurring problems is that, whether British or American, women’s wages are increasingly vital to the family budget. And yet while there continues to be a lack of parity in earned income it will always be women’s wages that are sacrificed to childcare costs. Women’s biology may be used as a reason for them to stay home but it is their earning power (or lack of it) and prohibitively expensive childcare that continues to work against them, recession or not. A fact confirmed by new research just published by The Resolution Foundation which suggests that keeping women in work is not just a question of choice in 21st century Britain but an economic necessity as, in the low to middle income bracket, female employment has become increasingly vital to bolster an ever-decreasing family income and maintain living standards: ‘in 1968, men provided 70% of family incomes, women 11%; but by 2009, men brought in just 40% and women 24%’ (Alakeson 2011, p.1). A figure echoing that of America where, despite what backlash reporting would have us believe: ‘More than one-third of all two parent families today would be poor if both parents did not work’ (Coontz 1992, p.260). Indeed, according to Heather Boushey of the Center for American Progress, ‘the typical working wife brings home 42.2 percent, and four in 10 mothers – many of them single mothers – are the primary breadwinners in their families. The whole question of whether mothers should work is moot’ (Rosin 2010), Boushey adds: ‘This idealized family – he works, she stays home – hardly exists anymore.’ (in Rosin 2010).

And in conclusion

According to Natasha Zaretsky, the idealised ‘traditional’ family was originally conceived in the pages of *Time* magazine where, under the editorship of Henry Luce in the 1940s, the publication was used to call ‘on the nation to embrace “the opportunities of leadership in the world”’ by conjuring up an idealised image of the family. Not any family of course but ‘a white, middle-class family made up of a male breadwinner, a full-time wife and homemaker, and children.’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.5). Luce’s vision for the twentieth century – an America that would lead the world through the second World War – was realised through the repeated celebration of this ‘ideal’ family who, embodying the American Dream proved ‘that new household commodities and technologies were creating unprecedented leisure, and that the sacredness of the domestic realm made the Cold War worth fighting’ (Zaretsky 2007). This family was not only unrepresentative of many working class, non-white, non-traditional families but was also, according to historian Stephanie Coontz formed from two opposing and, in many ways, mutually exclusive family ideals – the first (from the mid-19th century) that encouraged the strong mother-child bond and the second (from the 1920s) focusing ‘on an eroticized couple relationship, demanding that mothers curb emotional “overinvestment” in their children’ (Coontz 1992, p.9). This contradictory image of the idealised white middle class woman within a ‘traditional’ family, was not only promulgated to encourage nationalism during World War II but was later used: ‘to sell washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face-creams, hair tints’ (pp. 63-4) and was further utilised to promote the ideal of the American dream.

Looking back over the history of the family it is plain to see how social and cultural changes have historically distorted opinions on parenting. Industrialisation and World War II are prime examples of how, when the economy changed, so did the expectations of both women’s and men’s roles within it and the family. Society may have determined that women work to help the war effort, but it was equally as forthright in its determination to get them back into the home when the men returned victorious and unemployed. By the end of the 1950s, and despite the reality of women’s working practices, according to Betty Friedan, the term “‘career woman” had become a dirty word in America’ (Friedan 1992, p.42) and middle class women were increasingly urged by the media to relinquish paid work to look after hearth and home while their men earned a family wage. Aided and abetted by newspaper and magazine admonitions to ‘do the right thing’ this attitude has continued since the post-War

period. And yet one thing has remained constant: since the split between the public and private sphere brought about by industrialisation, masculinity has increasingly been defined by men's ability to support a family while femininity remains linked to women's reproductive capacity.

As we have seen, the gendered nature of backlash reporting and 'trend journalism' conceals the reality behind a recession's effect on the population with women continuing to suffer from a higher global unemployment rate than men. Indeed, despite what American newspapers and British Government policy advisors would have us believe, according to a UN report from early 2009:

Long-standing inequalities in the gender distribution of economic and financial resources have placed women at a disadvantage relative to men in their capability to participate in, contribute to and benefit from broader processes of development. Despite considerable progress on many aspects of women's economic empowerment through, inter alia, increases in educational attainment and share of paid work, deeply entrenched inequality persists as a result of discriminatory norms and practices, and the pace of change has been slow and uneven across regions (DESA 2009, p.v).

This same report goes on to assert that:

The manner in which countries respond to the recession can have disproportionate impacts on women and girls, possibly reversing gains made, particularly through cuts in public spending on health and education and through inequitably designed safety nets. There is also increased risk of reductions in allocations to gender equality and women's empowerment (DESA 2009, p.24).

In addition, backlash reporting ignores the devastating effect that the global recession has had on Hispanic and black working class men and their families in America. Indeed, despite all of the scaremongering in the American press, US unemployment is now down to pre-recession levels: except for African Americans who, despite enjoying a fall of unemployment rates in January 2012 to 13.16 percent 'remains significantly higher than the 8.5 percent rate of November 2007, just prior to the recession' (U.S. Dept of Labor 2012, p.1) and whose unemployment rates remain the largest of all groups. Unemployment remains a problem in America, as it does in Britain, but the fact remains that the focus on white male unemployment in the US media masks the more pressing issues relating to race, class and female unemployment that have emerged through the latest round of job cuts.

This recession is much like any. Jobs come and go. It may well be true that the blue-collar trades are slowly being replaced and that 'thinking and communicating have come to eclipse physical strength and stamina as the keys to economic success' (The Economist 2011)

but the fact remains that all the time the family is imagined ‘traditionally’, while wage and employment equality remains just out of reach and while the world of work is organised into male dominated industries and female ones, there will be inequality both between male and female employees, black and white, working and middle-class and between mothers and non-mothers. In addition, backlash and trend reporting obfuscates one of the many real issues at stake: that childcare and maternity leave are vital for a nation’s economic growth. It seems that families in post-recession Britain are now making the same choices as those made by young Americans in the 1980s when, by delaying marriage and childbirth and by having less children, they chose to ‘preserve many of trappings of the postwar *economic* dream by sacrificing many aspects of the postwar *family* dream’ (Coontz 1992, p.266), emphasis in original). For journalist Polly Toynbee: ‘Family friendly policies are seen as lollipops for women voters, not as economic necessity’ but ‘States need more people and parents want more babies’ (Toynbee 2012). Indeed, if Toynbee is to be believed: ‘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’ (Toynbee 2012). A fact that we would do well to remember when reading newspaper reports about the gendered nature of job losses and their effect on families on both sides of the Atlantic.

ⁱ In a world where the print media is suffering falling sales, a cynic might suggest that this kind of copy also trades on middle class angst in order to sell newspapers. *The Washington Post* admitted as much in 2007 when reporting on the agenda behind the mommy wars by saying: ‘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 2007).

ⁱⁱ With only 60 per cent finding new jobs ‘about half at lower pay’ (Faludi 1992 p87).

ⁱⁱⁱ Presaging the contents of Reihan Salam’s report of 2009 (more on this later).

^{iv} Which covers over thirty nations and has been running for eleven years.

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