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How to Cite: Littler, J and Winch, A 2016 Feminism and Childcare: A Roundtable with Sara de Benedictis, Gideon Burrows, Tracey Jensen, Jill Rutter and Victoria Showunmi. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(1): 2, pp. 1–23, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/sim.212>

Published: 25 May 2016

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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ROUND TABLE

Feminism and Childcare: A Roundtable with Sara de Benedictis, Gideon Burrows, Tracey Jensen, Jill Rutter and Victoria Showunmi

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Introduction

This is an edited transcript of a roundtable event held at City University London in late 2014.¹ The point of this seminar was to ask: what progress have we made towards men and women equally sharing the childcare? Rearranging the domestic division of labour was a crucial issue foregrounded by second-wave feminism: but how much progress has actually been made since then? Second-wave feminists and beyond have recently been vocal in replying: 'not so much.' For example, Bea Campbell has argued that equitable childcare is the key issue that feminism has not been able to tackle. Nancy Fraser has pointed to the increasing divide between rich and poor parents: those who are able to buy themselves some kind of parity, and those who cannot. Angela McRobbie has discussed how neoliberal maternal imaginaries are foreclosing the possibilities for socialised childcare.² The very week our seminar took place, a survey was published by Mumsnet and the BBC Radio 4 programme *Woman's Hour* which found that working women do two-thirds of the chores. Its findings echoed the message of a wide number of works, including Rebecca Asher's

¹ Thanks to City University of London for funding the event and the transcription; thanks to Gabriel Bristow for transcribing it.

² Campbell, B., 2008. *Understanding Society and Remaking Politics. Cultures of Capitalism*, Soundings seminar series, London; Fraser, N. 2013. *Fortunes of Feminism*, Verso.; McRobbie, A. 2013. Feminism, the family and the new mediated maternalism in *New Formations*, 80–81.

book *Shattered*, where she argues that mothers often tend to remain as what she calls the 'foundation parent.'³

This situation is not confined to gender norms, arrangements and expectations within the domestic realm. There are many wider factors rendering this issue even more fraught. They include, firstly, the cost of childcare in Britain and the inflexibility of working hours for many of those who can get paid employment. Secondly, the continual underpayment of childcare workers because of its status as a caring, feminised profession. Thirdly, the difficulty in finding flexible part-time work that does not discriminate against women's career progression, thus contributing to the gendered pay gap. Fourthly, the financial survival of many parents who want to spend more time looking after their children. Fifthly, the individualised nature of many childcare arrangements, often as they fit around the demanding, atomised nature of contemporary employment, which can make it difficult to share solutions locally. And lastly, these factors include the cultural expectations of possible ways to be a 'parent' or a 'family' today; as well as imaginings beyond the heteronormative nuclear family.

In short, who raises children, and *how*, is intimately related to the wider work of social reproduction, to the widening of neoliberal disparities of wealth and poverty, and to changes in working cultures – including overwork and unemployment, as well as inflexibility.

The aim of this seminar was, therefore, a fairly broad one: to open up a dialogue between a range of commentators from different backgrounds – including practitioners and academics from a range of disciplines – in order to discuss what are the barriers (social, psychological, cultural, economic or political) that prevent an equal sharing of the childcare.

The speakers

Tracey Jensen, a Senior Lecturer at UEL working on a book about classed and gendered intersections of contemporary parenting culture.

³ Asher, R. 2012. *Shattered*, Vintage.

Sara de Benedictis, a PhD student at King's College London studying maternal subjects on British reality TV, and a research assistant at LSE for a project on mothers and employment.

Jill Rutter, Head of Policy at the Family and Childcare Trust, which recently conducted a major study into childcare in London.

Victoria Showunmi, a Lecturer at UCL Institute of Education, working on gender, class, race and identity; and a Trustee of Gingerbread.

Gideon Burrows, the author of *Men Can Do It: The Real Reasons Dads Don't Do Childcare and What Men and Women Can Do About It* (NGO Media, 2013).

Tracey Jensen: Could there be a better week to revisit debates about childcare and feminism? This week, Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* had a week of programming called *Chore Wars*. It tried to answer the difficult questions of how the burden of domestic work is *really* being shared between women and men in British households. As presenter Jane Garvey asked: 'What does the division of labour in the home look like since women started to work outside it? Has Betty Friedan's "unfulfilled housewife" been replaced by a generation of women, struggling to cope with too much to do, inside and outside the home?' Qualitative research into domestic time use in all the OECD countries shows that it is the unpaid, repetitive, routine work of childcare, the cleaning and laundry that is seen as women's work; and it is the non-routine – and thus noticeable – tasks that are seen as men's work. Many of the speakers on this week of programming noted that the gendered gap in domestic labour, including childcare – which was closing in the latter half of the 20th – has now stalled. At the current rate of change, domestic equality might not be reached until at least 2050. This much, we know already. What I want to think about today, critically, is how *Chore Wars* has been presented this week, and what this tells us about feminist debates on childcare and domestic work more broadly: how those things are presented and understood, in contemporary culture.

Chore Wars seems to promise something quite sociological: that it is not about individual men and women, but about the broader and invisible social forces that create circumstances in which unequal divisions of labour become inevitable. Yet, the programme was not at all sociological in its execution. The *Chore Wars* calculator is a specially created online quiz, which all *Women's Hour* listeners are invited to fill in, and which has been linked to by every major media news outlet. When you complete this calculator, you can find out if you are a 'trophy spouse,' a 'slacker,' or a 'super-human.' You are asked how much time you and your partner spend doing grocery shopping, cleaning, cooking, household admin, DIY, and then finally on paid work and childcare. It is interesting that this is left right until the end, and is just a small question. On the basis of these answers, the respondent is given a calculation of who does more, what kind of couple that makes you, and how you compare with other couples in the UK. Some of the possibilities are that you are 'rubber gloves twins' (that you share it equally) or that you are 'traditionalists.'

There are so many problems with this calculator and with the *Chore Wars* series of programmes. I have only got a few minutes, so I am just going to point out three. First of all, it reminds me of another online calculator that was publicised last year, again connected to some sociological research: *The Great British Class Survey*. Both of these calculators – the *Chore Wars* one and the class survey – are designed to bring sociological research into the public domain; which is what sociology is for: bringing private struggles into public debate. But how does presenting this, as a calculator, impact on the framing of the debate? The messy and emotional politics of domestic work is lost, just as the politics of class was lost in *The Great British Class Survey*.⁴ The whole way in which this debate is framed is incredibly heteronormative. Although the *Chore Wars* calculator itself allows respondents to enter 'you and your partner' in a non-gender-specific way, the dissemination of the survey and the findings have been conducted entirely in the language of men and women, mothers and fathers. The complexity of how gender, as a social location and as a position,

⁴ As Bev Skeggs discussed on *Thinking Allowed*, Radio 4, 6 May 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s4qq5>

becomes manifested through categories of work – that have and do not have value, or that are and are not paid – is lost when we fall into the shorthand of ‘men and women,’ ‘mothers and fathers.’ We need to remember that questions about childcare do not begin and end with the genitals.

Moreover, this heteronormativity clues us into another way that *Chore Wars* loses its political nuance. It is assumed that everyone who has responsibility for a home, a housework, for children, for childcare, is in a *couple*, and that debates about childcare are simply a matter of sharing that work more equitably between two parents. If you really want to get to the politics of childcare, you need to insist that the debate includes people who are raising children on their own. In the main, this is single mothers. There are a minority of single fathers as well, but 92% of single parents are mothers. A lot of organisations, featured on *Chore Wars* this week and in the childcare debates more broadly, have insisted on the value of childcare: it should be recognised in a tax system, and the work that mothers do is a significant contribution to the economy. Yet none of these organizations have extended those demands to single mothers. So, they are talking very much in terms of a parent who is partnered with a breadwinning spouse. A quarter of families in the UK are single-parent families. Is the childcare labour of the single mother as valued as the childcare labour of the married woman with a breadwinning spouse? Do those organisations – that demand that stay-at-home parents with a breadwinning spouse get recognised in the tax system – also demand that single stay-at-home parents also have their welfare benefits protected? This takes us to the heart of the moral economies of contemporary childcare debates, especially when we recall how single mothers have been a group hardest hit by austerity measures. Last year, the Fawcett Society described single mothers as ‘the shock-absorbers for the cuts.’ I think their absence from the childcare and *Chore Wars* debates becomes, even more, striking in that context.

Finally, the most important point I want to make, is that whenever the debate on childcare and feminism is revisited – as it was on *Chore Wars* on Radio 4, and as it is on this panel today – we need to think about what moment in feminism we are returning to, what point in feminist history, what text in the feminist canon we want to revisit. *Chore Wars* – and this is the case with much contemporary discussion about

childcare and domestic labour – returns to Betty Friedan’s classic book from 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, often credited with kick-starting second-wave feminism. This book gave North American housewives a vocabulary, with which to articulate their nameless dissatisfactions. But what are the effects of always returning to this particular text, to always tracing these debates back, around childcare and housework, to this book above others? What happens when we canonise certain feminist texts over others? The critiques of Friedan’s work are well rehearsed. But how, then, would the childcare debate change if we return to a different book, if we return to a different key moment? If we return to more militant and intersectional demands articulated by Marxist feminists – Sylvia Federici, Nicole Cox, Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa. These feminists were behind the *Wages For Housework* Campaign, founded in 1972, demanding that women get paid a full wage for their domestic labour. They made brilliant demands; they insisted: ‘we want our wages for housework in cash, we want them retroactively, we want all of them and we want them now.’ As Kathy Weeks points out in her 2011 book, *The Problem With Work*, the campaign was set up like a ransom demand.

Returning to this point of feminist activity – rather than the nameless dissatisfactions named by Friedan – also opens up childcare debates, bringing into other debates about the wage, the family wage, the wage system. It positions the family as part of the social factory of the wage system; a hidden – but essential part – which circulates a moral ideology about gender and valuation. In doing so, the return to this point of feminist activity naturalises, romanticises, privatises and depoliticises childcare and other hidden forms of value that take place within it. The *Wages For Housework* campaign offers us momentary glimpses into other systems of domination and power: social class, race, nationalism, sexuality. By extending these discussions, we can open out debates about the politics of childcare, and see these concealed pieces of labour as not only part of patriarchy between men and women, but also as part of the social relations of capitalism itself. Focusing on the wage, and articulating childcare in terms of receiving the wage – calling childcare work – is not meant to elevate it, or celebrate it, or sanctify it. But it is, as Federici says, ‘the first

step in refusing to do it.' This does not literally mean abandoning the children, which is something second-wave feminists are often accused of, but rather critiquing and interrogating the structures that govern this work, that leave it unpaid and therefore, under capitalism, leave it as unproductive.

The single policy that would change the childcare debate most, would be the introduction of free, full-time, universal childcare for anyone that needs it. However, this is never presented as an option. Instead, we have bits of tax relief for some families, some precarious childcare voucher schemes – which are always at risk of being deemed 'unaffordable' – and scraps of free childcare for limited hours available, in a patchy system. Such a policy – of free universal childcare – must be developed in tandem with reform of the wage. Stagnant wages, suppressing pay rises and supplementing low wages through welfare are all well-known components of neoliberalism. We must remember that the struggle not to work, to work less, or to refuse to work, must be a central part of this demand to extend childcare. So *Chore Wars* has asked us to revisit the questions: who is doing domestic labour? Have the demands of feminism been met? And, crucially: *which* demands, and *whose* feminism? Can we ever afford to phrase this as simply a battle between the sexes? How might we reframe it as part of a bigger machinery of work and value? What are the alternatives to the liberal feminist demand for more private childcare? Can we make this into a more radical demand for *socialised* childcare that also interrogates the elevation of paid work?

Sara de Benedictis: There are a broad number of issues that we could concentrate on, to unpack why women still do the majority of childcare. We could talk about the financial blow of living with the gender pay gap, the huge hikes in childcare costs, the lack of availability of childcare, the policy rhetoric around maternity and paternity leave, and the cultural representations of maternal figures that hold up a new bar that women and mothers need to aspire to. I think, we need to hold these all in tension to explore what is going on at the moment; and also, we need to consider the *nuances* of unequal childcare. For some, unequal childcare relations may be

about the divisions of gendered labour in the private and public sphere. For others, unequal childcare relations may be about social impingements on actually being able to care for your children. What is interesting in the current austerity climate is that we are actually seeing people who *do* have childcare responsibilities and who are *mothers*, being part of a 'voicing' of broader political issues: I am thinking of the *Focus E15* Campaign in particular.

In other words: women's prescribed role as carers is not as accessible to everyone, and this has a long classed and raced history. Today, I want to focus on one element of unequal childcare relations, by thinking about the psychosocial aspects of being, or becoming a mother. I want to consider some of the investments and the values in terms of subjectivity in a neoliberal, 'post-feminist' context concerned with 'having it all' and becoming 'the right type of mother.' My PhD explores a small group of 20 women's opinions and reactions to childbirth on television. I was interested in, to quote Bev Skeggs, the 'spectacular visualisation of women's work on television,' which has historically been obscured in the public sphere. The background, the context of this, is an upsurge in maternal representations across multiple sites, or 'maternal publicity' as Imogen Tyler calls it, which positions women as carers and labourers. However, this is marked by contradictions and paradoxes; one of which being that, despite an increase in visibility and representation of largely white, middle-class mothers, and of choice in relation to parenting practices, women are *still* doing the majority of childcare. So this maternal publicity has definitive post-feminist elements.

I talked to women who had children and women that had not, and who were variously positioned, socially. This range was crucial for my research, as I was interested in exploring different types of maternal subject, not necessarily those who are 'only mothers.' I wanted to broaden it out and consider how these issues affect different types of women. I was also interested in how different social positions were shaping investments towards representations of births, mothers, labouring, and so on. Whilst birth is the focus of my research; it does not necessarily mean that when a woman gives birth, she ends up caring for a child. Being a mother and caring for children came up a lot in my research process, and for my research participants it was

usually a given that giving birth equated to a woman looking after children; although this did not necessarily have any biological link. Men were decidedly absent when we were talking about this process.

During the research, all of the women held being, or becoming a mother, in very high esteem, with traditional notions of selflessness and caring coming to the foreground. But investments in this differed, depending on their social position. Some of the middle-class women were devoted in (their) education or career; having children would come later. Whereas for some of the working-class participants having a child and caring earlier on was more of a priority. So building a community around family was vital. As Valerie Walkerdine has argued, the investment of young women in careers and motherhood is classed; and having a child can become a form of solace for those who are disenfranchised more broadly.

But the key point I want to make is that these maternal narratives of past, present and future were *continuously* marked by ambivalence and anxiety, around living up to this kind of new female carer-labourer model. This was also the case for those who did not have children but were planning to do so. The narratives of these maternal subjects-in-waiting were just as fraught as those of mothers. They all voiced anxiety in different ways. The labouring, working-class, single mother, worrying about whether the time she could spend with her child was good enough. The middle-class, stay-at-home mother, concerned that not working was setting a bad example for her children. The labouring, working-class mother whose narrative was filled with regret about the career decision she had made a decision that was necessary to support her child, but which made her feel unfulfilled career-wise. The middle-class woman with a five-year plan to have children around her career. The working-class woman who had waited to have a child, and was worried that she had left it too late. And the working-class woman who had had an abortion, as she needed to work, but was filled with regret and anxiety about whether this meant she could ever be a good mother. In their different ways, across the board, there was a sense of *failure*. No-one could do it 'right,' no matter what choices they made. The *investment*, the stake in being, or becoming this kind of mother was really high, and everyone was still trying to uphold and subjectively labour towards this.

Whilst there was ambivalence about how to be – or whether one was – a good mother, there was little uncertainty about who set the bar. It was the image of the unattainably good mother, who laboured and cared while seamlessly juggling with all these balls. This image always loomed in their narratives' background. There was a lot at stake, and a lot of subjective labour that went in to upholding such an impossible, monolithic ideal. I think we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of establishing another singular dominant model that marks women as maternal failures. We need to be careful of imparting moral value and deeming one decision as 'right;' rather, it is imperative to embrace different investments and values in relation to being a mother and father. Not everyone can achieve this ideal, and what is 'right' depends on the position from which you are looking at this 'right' decision: it can also mask broader issues of inequality. A key point is that we need to hold onto the larger issues surrounding unequal childcare, particularly inequalities, in relation to the dominant ideologies of being, or becoming a mother. At the same time, we need to consider the nuances of individual investment and values – about how one is shaped socially – in terms of their history and their current positioning.

Jill Rutter: I work for a charity called the *Family and Childcare Trust*, which grew out of an organisation called the *Daycare Trust*, which in turn, grew out of a lot of campaigning by women in the 1970s. I am here today because of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. In the last 15 years, we have seen a revolution in childcare provision in this country. Today in England, there are 1.7 million places in nurseries and crèches, compared with just 100,000 when the Labour government took office in 1997. There are 600,000 places in after-school clubs in England, and there were virtually none of these clubs in 1997. Also, there are systems in place, to help parents with their childcare costs: through free, part-time, early education, through childcare vouchers for better-off parents, through tax credits for those on low incomes (more about those in a moment), and through some smaller schemes. However I think, there are lots of myths about childcare and its provision, and a lot of these myths are very gendered.

Historically, apart from a window in the 1950s, children were very rarely only cared for by their mothers. In the 19th century, wealthy families had governesses, middle-class families used servants and other relatives to care for their children alongside mothers. Poorer families used relatives as well. After the expansion of elementary education, very young children ended up in elementary schools. In 1900, 43% of all three-year-olds were in elementary schools. In wartime, the need for female labour to replace men who were off fighting caused many workplace nurseries to open up. These closed in 1918 and 1945 and women went back to the home. After 1945, through the taxation system, we had in place something called the *Married Man's Tax Allowance*, which consumed huge amounts of state money. After health and education provision, it was the biggest transfer of money to the family that existed, and it essentially subsidised women to stay at home. But by the 1960s, the government realised that this was unsustainable. Moreover, our economy required two earners in a household, and second-wave feminism was pressing for greater equality. These three trends came together by the 1990s, and within mainstream politics, we had pressure to expand childcare.

In terms of non-governmental organisations and pressure groups, the *Community Nursery Group* argued for co-operative nurseries in every community. The *National Childcare Campaign*, which became the *Daycare Trust*, was pre-eminent. By the late 1980s, politicians like Keith Joseph – and Ken Clarke, the Secretary of State for Health, who was concerned that he was losing all his nurses when they had children – started to argue for the expansion of childcare provision. There was some movement in the early 1990s through family credit, and a pilot childcare voucher scheme in 1996. However, we were far behind other countries – Scandinavia, New Zealand, most of Eastern Europe. In 1997, the government that came to power put childcare high on the political agenda, led by women like Harriet Harman and Margret Hodge, who are still around. There was a green paper on childcare in 1998 and after that some expansion of free early education, and the development of the tax credit scheme. But 2004 was a more significant date. This year is the 10th anniversary of the 2004 childcare strategy 'Choice for Parents: The Best Start for Children.' While it was Labour's third

strategy, it stands out, as it was the most comprehensive in its reach, coverage and ambition. And it continues to shape modern policy. Its aims were to ensure greater work-life balance, to help parents stay in work after they have children, to improve children's outcomes through high-quality early education, and to narrow the gaps between poorer families and their better-off cohorts. Gender equality, I think, was implicit rather than explicit, and I will talk more about this in a moment. The 2004 strategy extended parents' rights – mothers' rights primarily – to paid parental leave and gave them the right to ask for flexible work opportunities.

Today, all adults can ask for flexible work opportunities. The 2004 strategy paved the way for the 2006 Childcare Act, which placed a duty on local authorities to ensure sufficient childcare for working parents – not to provide sufficient childcare, but to ensure sufficient childcare. Today, 90% of nurseries are run by private and voluntary sector organisations, but local authorities have a duty to manage this regulated market. The 2004 strategy also set in place measures to improve the quality of childcare and to make it more affordable. Today, financial support with childcare costs includes free hours of nursery education. All parents of three to four-year-olds in England get 15 hours of free early education, and that has recently been extended to the poorest 40% of two-year-olds. Through tax credits, low-income families get 70% of their childcare costs met. I would actually disagree with Tracey on the issue of support for single parents. It is primarily single mothers who get support with their childcare costs through tax credit because the maximum income thresholds are set so low, that it is really only the very lowest income families that get help through tax credits. If a family of two adults and two children has a gross household income of more than £32,000 a year, there is no tax credit support for them: not with childcare costs, not with working tax credits, not with child tax credits. Yet, there is a childcare voucher scheme for better-off parents.

By 2016, our financial support services will have changed, and people receiving Universal Credit will get 85% of their childcare costs met. As for those not getting Universal Credit, there is a new tax-free voucher, where up to £2,000 of childcare costs can be met. A great deal has been achieved since the 2004 strategy: parents get

more financial support, record numbers of early years staff now have a level three qualification, and we have a uniform system of inspection for childminders and nurseries, and above all, childcare has been put on the political agenda, through a cross-party consensus that childcare matters.

Nevertheless, while there is much to be celebrated, there is much that is wrong. Childcare is not working for children, for mothers, and I would argue, for the broader economy. Only 17% of families with dependent children get help with the financial costs of childcare. Even families using part-time childcare, and after-school clubs and part-time nurseries will be spending about £7,000 a year in Britain. In this country, parents are paying proportionally more of their income on childcare than any other developed country, apart from Switzerland. Maternal employment is among the lowest in developed countries. It is not just Scandinavia, with its strong welfare state and high levels of gender equality, where more mothers work, but Portugal and Poland as well. Even if working parents can afford childcare, only half of local authorities have enough of it – despite their legal obligation to ensure enough provision. Childcare is not working for parents who have atypical working patterns: shift workers, those whose hours of work fluctuate from week to week, parents on zero-hours contracts. In those circumstances, it is often grandmothers who step in and provide childcare, which is fantastic if you have a grandparent or grandmother who lives near you but not all of us have that luxury. Moreover, too much nursery provision is of poor quality, and it is only high-quality early education that makes a difference to working parents.

We have not talked about the childcare workforce very much, but it is primarily a female workforce. 98% of all nursery workers are female. Last week I looked at the latest figures from a government survey called the *Annual Survey for Hours and Earnings*. Bankers are at the top of this survey. The least well-paid group, of any group in this country, are childcare workers, with average gross weekly earnings coming to £287 a week. The childcare workforce is appallingly badly paid. Despite the right to ask for flexible work, family-friendly employment practices are not available to all workers. It is the lowest paid, and those with the fewest qualifications who have

least access to flexible work, because they do not have the bargaining power, that highly qualified female workers have. Crucially, I would argue that our expansion of childcare has not narrowed gender inequalities in the workplace. In fact, some of our interventions in childcare, I think, have a profound impact on gender roles. We all know about the motherhood pay penalty. Part-time working is a common strategy for many mothers, to help balance family life, and to keep childcare costs down. Yet in many organisations, part-time jobs are often of a lower status, than full-time employment, and are less likely to lead to promotion. Research by the *Timewise Foundation* in 2012 showed that just 3% of jobs advertised in March 2012, paid a salary of more than £20,000 a year. There is a stigma in asking for family-friendly work – you are seen as being uncommitted. Furthermore, only 43% of men take their statutory, paid paternity leave – let alone any additional transferrable parental leave. It is mostly women that organise, undertake and pay for most childcare; women set up formal childcare arrangements. Yet, when *Universal Credit* is introduced, only one person in a household will receive a *Universal Credit* payment. This payment is essentially a transfer from the purse to the wallet. I would guess there are lots of arguments in households about paying for childcare when you have had that purse to wallet transfer. Above all, and as our previous speakers have said, it is women who are bearing the burden of a childcare system, that is simply not meeting the needs of a modern family.

What would we like at the *Family and Childcare Trust*? One thing that we argue for quite strongly is a ‘use it or lose it’ daddy-leave period for parental leave. We are changing parental leave, and from April 2015, more parental leave can be transferred between partners. We think that no shift in workplace issues and issues about labour in the family can take place, unless men get their own period of parental leave, that only they can take. We also believe that root and branch reform of childcare subsidies is needed, and we would like to see more supply-side funding of nurseries and a shift away from the tax credit system that has many flaws in its incentivisations of a one-and-a-half earners household. We aspire to see a shift to a system that the Scandinavian countries have in place, which many Eastern European countries have

in place, which New Zealand has in place, *where state subsidies go to providers to deliver free or low-cost childcare*, rather than the complicated messy system that we have at present, which can reinforce gender inequalities.

Victoria Showunmi: I have not got a formal paper, but rather, in many ways, I have a series of questions. I would like just take a moment to outline a couple of things I do. One is that I am a trustee of *Gingerbread*, which is an organisation that supports single parents, and before that I was part of the National Council of *One-Parent Families*. So the first thing is that I am involved with the rights of single parents. The second is that when Harriet Harman and the Labour Party first came in, you may remember, they started to talk about welfare to work. One of the things I made a lot of noise about at this time was: 'ok, you are interested in single parents, but I am interested in what is going on with black lone parents.' So I wrote the first report on black lone parents in England. I wanted to hear their voices regarding childcare and the various issues surrounding that. Thirdly, I am an academic at the Institute of Education, working on issues of gender, identity, race and class.

A question I would like to raise is: *which* men and women are we referring to? We have made many points throughout the different discussions so far. Are we speaking about all women or just middle-class, white women that are able to afford childcare? What is this so-called 'perfect' family? Are we also able to talk about 'complex families' which perhaps are more difficult and challenging to connect with childcare? Another aspect to consider is that many women do not have the 'luxury' of negotiating childcare arrangements with their partner, as they may feel intimidated. Why do I say that? What do I mean by that? Well, in short: for example those women that experience domestic violence. Many women are dealing with that, or just dealing with the fact that they have got nobody to discuss or to negotiate issues of childcare with, in the first place. The reason I raised this is because if one wants to ask questions, there has to be an element of *ease*. For women not to be scared of asserting their feelings.

So, we have these points: a discussion about who is doing the childcare and who is not; about where the complex family sits in relation to this; and a consideration of

women who are quite fearful about raising those questions but are becoming more assertive. The next part of the question we were asked to look at was: how have we come a long way, from fighting for feminism and equal rights, and then moving into, I would say, complacency? There was a sense that 'we've got it all' or 'as women we've made it,' so we put the baton down and drifted into a mode of complacency. Until of course, we got hit on the head by the current government. We have had a rude awakening. Suddenly, we think 'what has happened?' Everything is slipping away! Childcare has started to go down the drain, and now we are back full circle, once again asking the question: 'which women can afford childcare?'

Who am I in relation to this? I am a mother with three girls; I have had two marriages; and yes, I have negotiated childcare. Once again, I find that I am a single parent. The interesting aspect around this state is that one faces the argument that 'well, you are a single parent and a professional, so negotiating around childcare is very different from someone has perhaps not such a good income as yourself.' However, what I think you are alluding to, Jill, is how the single mother who has actually got a professional role outside of the family, often, has no one to negotiate with. It is thought, 'well you are ok.' You are trying to pull your childcare together but you cannot tap into any support because you are seen as the 'so-called professional single parent.' However, the issues are still the same. You might actually be financially worse than the person who is on welfare because you are unable to access any support. This is something I discuss as a *Gingerbread* Trustee.

If we explore the way in which many women's rights are being eroded, as we open the curtain and peak through the activity of the current government, we can hear a lot of noise surrounding childcare. But what are the barriers to action? Perhaps the notion of feminism itself. I was speaking this morning at a seminar around the education of Nigerian girls. Now, why do I mention that? Well, even understanding and embracing the word 'feminism' within different contexts and different cultures, involves considering how the word has its own barriers. Just like childcare. Then when you start putting them together, there is a debate to be had around that.

Let's begin with a child starting to socialise in the world. Think about children when they are starting to socialise, and they are playing with dolls – even if you do not want them to – and they want to be a princess, which then develops into them starting to think they should predominantly be 'caring.' Boys are generally presented with more macho images and they then move away from a caring aspect. This develops during teenage years – and who cares or supports during this time? And what roles does the adult carer take? This is significant. The discussion could be left there. But when we explore these themes in relation to black families, there is a different dialogue. You may have people knocking on your door, asking your family to fit the childcare agency's so-called norm, the same as everybody else's childcare arrangements. For example, it may mean that black families who are looking after 'other people's' children, but who are not registered childminders, cannot actually tap into the financial support available because they are part of an extended family. They miss out on the money, whilst they might have a strong extended support network. That is, of course, a different dialogue.

When you look at some girls in black families – and I use the word 'black' in a very political sense – you can see how girls are often pushed into the responsibility of being a carer. What is going on there? What happens if they do not do this? When you are the girl child, you are meant to be resilient, you are meant to be supportive, you are meant to be the one doing the washing-up and the cooking and looking after the younger sister and brother and all those types of things. And what happens if you *do not* do that – and you stand up and say: "well actually, I am not doing this, because I see myself as a feminist." In households, the socialisation of girls contributes to that later feeling that it is your key responsibility to look after the child; whether you have got a child or not, that in itself is an interesting question, because the conversation we are having here is also around whether or not you choose to have children. But I would say, provide my daughters to people who do not have or cannot have children, like many of my friends, but who would have loved to. This is part of the discussion around childcare as well – it helps to support each other through extended families.

Another issue I do not think we have tapped into, really, is: how do wider communities view feminism and childcare? What do they say about this? Because we are in a community where we can have that dialogue, but when you start knocking on other people's doors and asking about childcare and roles – whose role do you think it is? That is a different dialogue in itself. I think about that with relationships; as a strong feminist. While you are having a relationship and you are talking to – I am heterosexual – men, their key point on childcare is often: you are the woman, you are the mother, you are better at it than I am. So you have that dialogue as well to contend with. And what is interesting I think as well is that having the 'luxury' of talking about childcare and 'revisiting' it is – perhaps I am being a bit controversial – is a 'Western' luxury.

I want to make the last part very personal because I think it is important – it has been a struggle, because, as a feminist, I wanted to feel I could share these ideas about childcare with whichever partner I had, as a liberal way of looking at it. But when you are left holding the baby, and at the same time you have still got to put 'bread' on the table, you are then left with the question of: what do you *do* around the childcare? I always use an au-pair to help me. At the same time, you also have to try and work through the system. My own good news is that I have been pursuing the Childcare Agency, and I just had a phone call to say that they have been able to pin down the absent parent and obtain some financial recompense going way back, years. Now, I am able to negotiate the system and really make this happen. Many people have not got those negotiation skills and the stamina to keep going. Now you may think that I have gone completely off point and into a different arena, but I think it fits into this new wave of feminism and the question of: how we actually work with complexity to try and make equality happen for *all* women? Not just certain women, but also diverse types of women, so that we also feel that we are part of the discussion. I just wanted to end with one last thing, which is this. I like Whitney Houston. I will hold up my hand. One of the songs which keeps me going is 'I didn't know my own strength.' If you know that song – and even some of my students love it, because I do work around black women and girls and their well-being – it

really pulls together what we are trying to say about feminism and childcare revisited. Because this is a problem that goes backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards. And we have to diversify, and bring all our voices in to this discussion, so that we all work and feel together as a world.

Gideon Burrows: I want to talk about men's role in feminism and childcare. Or to be more specific, something that will I am sure will resonate with all the speakers, which is men's lack of a role in feminism and childcare so far, and where the rights and responsibilities really ought to lie. My background is as a writer and a journalist. Like any woman in the room with children, when my first child came along, my life was turned upside-down. Not only in terms of sleepless nights and all the usual gooey stuff, but also in terms of my working life, and what I was able to get out of it; choices I had to make, sacrifices I had to make. My wife and I decided from day one that everything we would do regarding childcare would be split exactly down the middle. Any sacrifices, any jobs that would be done. That was a decision which was based on an equal relationship, which we, as socialists, were attempting to pursue together, even in the context of the kind of unequal society that was around us. What ended up happening was that I would be out on the street, for example, with my three-month-old baby, looking for all the rest of these 'new men' that the newspapers, the breakfast television shows, the adverts were telling me were out there too. The idea of the 'new father' was ubiquitous at the time. Tony Blair made an enormous amount of capital about being an involved father; and when David Cameron and Nick Clegg came into power, they released a story about how they were bonding over making an Ikea cupboard together for David Cameron's new baby. The world I was supposed to be looking out on was one, where men were supposed to be playing more of a role, where men were doing their 'fair share,' where men were becoming 'rubber glove men.' You will remember at the time – they are still ubiquitous today – pictures of men wearing aprons, and headlines such as 'Men Are The New Wives in British Households.' So I was out there with my baby, on the streets, going to playgroups, going

to support services in a maternity ward and elsewhere, and I couldn't see these other men *anywhere*.

The reason I could not see them, as I later found out when I started researching for my book, is that they really did not exist. The 'new fatherhood' was a myth that was being sold to us because it made us feel good about ourselves. It meant that we, as men, *did not actually have to do anything about it*. And what happened was, I found myself, as a new father, out there, trying to live this ideal, new father role, supposedly with other men, being patronised and excluded by services, at the school gate by mums, by posters saying 'Mums and toddler group.' Our local café said 'mums and toddlers welcome.' I can see you are all pulling out your tissues and shedding tears over how difficult it was for a man to be out there. I would not blame you for saying: 'well, welcome to the club.' So it led me to want to challenge this idea of 'new fatherhood.' I started working on a book, not unlike Rebecca Asher's book really, but from a men's perspective, that actually looked at what the truth was about this. The book self-consciously tackled the issue from a straight, middle-class perspective, because that is where the new fatherhood myth is located. As I say in the book, parents from other races, parents from non-traditional family backgrounds – gay parents, single parents – I will tell you what, they have *all* got their own stereotypes to worry about.

So, I was specifically tackling the middle-class, straight picture of the man, with the baby-bjorn strapped to his chest, walking round the park during the day, who just – apart from perhaps in Stoke Newington – did not exist. What did we discover? We discovered that in the last ten years, there has been a growth of just 6000 more men becoming stay-at-home dads. 6000 more men have been caring for children who are under school age, but we were being told by newspapers that 'one-in-seven of fathers now do the majority of childcare.' That was a survey put out by *Viva*, the insurance company, which for three years it was run by all the major media, including the BBC, and *it just was not true*. Like my colleague earlier, we discovered that only half of men actually take their legal entitlement to paternity leave. This is in UK law – you can take it, but they are not taking it. We discovered that 45% of the workforce is

full-time men, 28% of the workforce is full-time women, part-time women 21% of the workforce, and part-time men 6%. I also discovered that women without children were far more likely to have part-time jobs, half of women with children under five are in work at all, but more startlingly, and more depressingly really, men with children were less likely to work part-time than men without children. They were less likely to work flexibly, they were less likely to ask for flexible working, and they were less likely to be *granted* flexible working. Perhaps even more depressing still, those men, who did ask for flexible working from their employers, were more likely to ask for non-childcare reasons, than for childcare reasons.

Therefore, the question is why is this taking place? Why is it that fathers are the fourth in line for becoming carers of our children? First is women, second is professional childcare, third is grandparents – and I found out, startlingly, that a lot of grandparents were also caring for their own parents, as well as for our children – and then fourth, if nobody else could manage it, then maybe dads would take a few days off, if the boss does not mind. So, I was asking: why is it that the truth, the reality, did not match up? And I was also asking, what is the damage that this is doing?

These are issues that have been repeated around this table today. The fact that men are *not* taking on childcare, in the quantities that we have been led to believe, is perpetuating the pay gap. Women, before childbirth, earn more than men. It is only after childbirth that the pay gap increases and continues to increase. Women were suffering reduced opportunities for promotion at work, while men were not, even though men have children too. In other words, what I discovered – and this will sound very familiar to everyone in the room – was that men were benefitting specifically from *not* doing childcare, at the expense of women, who were losing out and were having to make tough decisions themselves, because of childcare. The book looks at what some of those barriers are, and it covers all things like paternity leave and pay, benefits and the care system, and all of the things we have discussed so far today. My major thesis in the book was: these are all barriers, and they need to change. But they are not enough, because men are not taking up the opportunities or the obligations that they ought to have, even in the face of the

wriggle-room in the legislation. For example, in the 2013 change in legislation that gave parents the right to share 26 weeks of parental leave, just 1600 men took up that opportunity in two whole years. 1600 men took up the opportunity, that according to the newspapers, they so desperately want. Nevertheless, the government went ahead, and introduced on top of it, an extra 20 or so weeks of parental leave that the parents can share between themselves. Essentially, they perpetuated the new fatherhood myth by increasing the amount of leave that men can share with women at the birth of their child, without any real evidence that men were already taking what they are already entitled to. The fact that men are *still* not taking their legal right to even the two weeks paternity leave demonstrates that this is the case.

So I looked at all the different barriers that there were – and I do not doubt that there are barriers in terms of childcare, in terms of costs, and even sociological pressures, in terms of women and their attitude towards men; in terms of men and their attitudes towards other men who take a day off work; in terms of the boss, in terms of the legal legislation. But unfortunately, I came to the conclusion that all of these circumstances are still not enough to prevent men from doing what they ought to do. And I hope that will resonate with you. The conclusion I came to was: we cannot sit and wait for the ideal set of circumstances to arise, where it is then suddenly convenient for men to do their fair share of childcare. Whatever circumstances we currently have to put up with, men should be doing exactly, or as close to exactly, the amount of childcare and child responsibility as their partners. Because it is very easy for people – and people said it to me at the time – to say, “well it’s alright for you, you work part-time, you get to choose your hours.” And I say “no, I *chose* to work part-time, I *chose* to work the way I did, I made sacrifices to my salary and my opportunities, so that I could fulfil my responsibilities as a shared parent.” I created the working life that I have, and I had the opportunity to create the working life that I have, because I acknowledged the responsibilities that I had. Shared parenting and equality parenting is not going to happen by accident; and it cannot just be led by women, or by feminists, or by discussions only about feminism and childcare. Men have to acknowledge that they have a role to play, to make this stuff happen.

The discourse about childcare and equality not only has to include men, but it has to include men acknowledging the sacrifices and the difficulties that they have to endure, in order for equality to happen.

This is the point I was trying to make, when I was doing the media work. Unfortunately, the result was a very immature debate in the media in response to my book. I did a lot of media interviews, and I was on BBC Breakfast TV, and I was interviewed by Bill Turnbull who turned to me and said, "I'm sorry, but are you seriously suggesting that men should take a sacrifice in their salary and their opportunities, so that women have more opportunities?" I said: "Yes, that is exactly what I am saying." That is what I am saying. I went on *Woman's Hour*, and I went on Mariella Frostrup's programme *Bringing Up Babies*, and in both cases we were specifically there to talk about equality in childcare. In both cases, every interviewee was a woman, apart from me. And I sit here, in this room with you, just about, and every panel member, once again, is a woman. It is time for men to take responsibility and to enter the debate. And it is time for women too, to call on men to enter the debate; to step up to the plate. The language should revolve around rights and responsibilities for men. Men should not only get the good stuff out of childcare; they also need to take the hit for equality, to really be achieved.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Littler, J and Winch, A 2016 Feminism and Childcare: A Roundtable with Sara de Benedictis, Gideon Burrows, Tracey Jensen, Jill Rutter and Victoria Showunmi. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(1): 2, pp. 1–23, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/sim.212>

Published: 25 May 2016

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