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## Incongruous encounters: media representations and lived experiences of stay-at-home mothers

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**Incongruous Encounters:  
Media Representations and Lived Experiences of Stay-at-home Mothers**

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## **Abstract**

This article juxtaposes mediated representations of stay-at-home mothers (SAHMs) with accounts of 22 UK educated middle-class SAHMs. It exposes a fundamental chasm between media constructions of women's "opting out" of the workplace as a personal choice, and the factors shaping women's decisions to leave a career, and their complex, often painful consequences. The juxtaposition highlights three aspects largely rendered invisible in current representations of SAHMs: (1) the influence of husbands' demanding careers and work cultures on their wives' "choices" to not return to paid employment; (2) the issue of childcare; and (3) women's immense unpaid domestic and maternal labour. Although media representations often fail to correspond to middle-class SAHMs' lives, they shape their thinking and feelings and reconstruct their deepest yearnings and sense of self. In particular, SAHMs speak of feeling invisible, lacking confidence and being silent and silenced. I conclude by discussing how the disconnect between media representation and SAHMs' experience may be enhancing and sustaining their silence, which supports and re-secures a patriarchal capitalist system, and reflecting on the role of feminist media research to voice the lived experience of gender inequality.

## **Keywords**

Mothers, choice, paid work, media representations, silence

## Introduction

Maternal figures are remarkably visible in the contemporary mediated culture (Addison et al. 2009; Tyler 2011) and constructed in substantially different ways from their counterparts in earlier eras (e.g. Walters and Harrison 2012; Littler 2013; McRobbie 2013; Thomson et al. 2011). The “Happy Housewife” that populated 1950s’ and 1960s’ US and UK magazines, advertisements and newspapers, prescribed, almost exclusively, the wife-and-mother role as the feminine post-war ideal (Friedan 1963; Gavron 1966; Hubback 1957; Nicholson 2015). The political struggles of the 1970s, especially Second Wave Feminism and the Women’s Liberation movement, prompted significant political, legal, economic and social changes, including a substantial rise in the participation of women – especially middle-class women<sup>1</sup> - in the workforce. In the UK, women’s overall labour force participation has risen from 53% in 1971 to 72% in 2014; in the US it has gone from 43.9% in 1970 to 57.7% in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Although the “Happy Housewife” image has never disappeared completely and continues to retain some force over public imagination (Ahmed 2010), since the late 1970s, the “supermom” or “career mother” has assumed centre-stage in western cultural media landscape:

She has that working-mother look as she strides forward, briefcase in one hand, smiling child in the other. Literally and figuratively, she is moving ahead [...] She is confident, active, ‘liberated’. She has made it in a man’s world without sacrificing her femininity. And she has done this on her own (Hochschild 1989, 1).

From the 1990s, a time associated with the emergence of post-feminist media culture, women increasingly have been expected to subscribe to the “new sexual contract” (McRobbie 2009), that is, to perform simultaneous, successful femininities as “good mothers” and productive economic labourers. The current media and cultural sphere is replete with images

of stories of women who combine successful careers and motherhood, crack the “confidence code” (Kay and Shipman 2014), “lean in” (Sandberg 2013) and “have it all” (for a critical discussion of these popular cultural messages, see Rottenberg 2014; Author 2015). McRobbie (2013, 121) argues that the “new mediated materialism” in the contemporary mediated sphere, perpetuates a commonsensical notion that “champion[s] women who will enter the labour market and stay in it” since “female labour power is far too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be an advocate of long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers.”

Alongside women being cajoled to embrace the “new sexual contract”, the seemingly contradictory figure, of the white, middle-class “stay-at-home-mother” (SAHM) who has “opted out” of the workplace is receiving growing visibility in US and UK media (Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Littler 2013; Orgad and De Benedictis 2015; Vavrus, 2007). However, whether “career” mothers or SAHMs, research shows that maternal figures are configured narrowly in terms of individualization, self-improvement, hyper-sexuality, choice, self-responsibilization, capacity and empowerment (Allen and Osgood 2009; Allen and Taylor 2012; Boyer 2014; Ekinsmyth 2013; Littler 2013; McRobbie 2013; Orgad and De Benedictis 2015; Tyler 2011; Vavrus 2007) – values and ideas closely associated with a neoliberal “hegemonic rationality” (Couldry 2010) that “proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” (Harvey 2005 cited in Gill and Scharff 2011, 5).

Studies of earlier eras highlight how representations of motherhood, maternity and work often failed to correspond with and masked women’s lived experience, thus supporting and helping to reproduce structures and relations of gender inequality. For example, Judith Hubback (1957) in the UK and famously Betty Friedan in the US (1963) exposed how the oppressive 1950s’ image of the Happy Housewife “hardened into a mystique” (Friedan 1963,

34) that made women deny their dreams and identities and masked their unhappiness and depression. Similarly, in relation to the 1980s, Arlie Hochschild (1989) for the US and Rosalind Coward (1993) for the UK observed the stark mismatch between media images (especially in women's magazines) of successful career mothers that dominated popular imagination, and women's experience. Happy images of career mothers hid "intricate webs of tension, and the huge, hidden emotional cost to women, men and children, having to manage inequality" (Hochschild 1989, 59-60).

Today, "[t]he tension between the lived experience of inequality and its representation in the media", which these and other feminist accounts exposed so brilliantly, "is as obvious [...] as it was 50 years ago" (Gallagher 2014, 27). However, feminist media studies since the mid-1990s have moved from studying women's participation in everyday life (McRobbie 2009) to analysis of media texts, with little empirically-based research into whether and how their meanings correspond with individuals' lived experience (Grindstaff and Press 2014). In particular, since the turn of the century, the relationship between contemporary representations of motherhood and work and women's experience has remained largely unexplored.<sup>3</sup> This paper responds to calls for feminist media studies to re-focus on lived experience and subjectivity, and empirically examine their relationship with mediated representations and culture (Carter and McLaughlin 2011; Gallagher 2014; Gill 2011; Grindstaff and Press 2014; McRobbie 2009). It seeks to contribute to feminist enquiry's pivotal examination of the relations between mediated and lived experience, between normative narratives and mediated images and the lived realities of women (and men), and the consequences of these relationships for people's feelings and identities and gender power relations (e.g. Gill and Scharff 2011; Radway 1984).

Specifically, my interest is in whether and how contemporary representations correspond with and shape women's lived experiences of motherhood and work and,

crucially, what they hide. I focus on educated, predominantly white middle-class women who can afford to stay in paid employment and buy childcare, but leave their careers on becoming mothers. These middle-class educated SAHMs are a privileged subset of women; although not the “super-rich”, they can afford to continue in paid employment upon having children. Thus, their exit from the workplace would seem at odds with western media and policy emphasis on women’s workforce participation and pursuit of a successful career.

In the UK, while overall the story of women’s participation in the labour force is often celebrated as a “success” (e.g., Wolf 2013), its “heroines” are women generally rather than mothers. Women’s workforce participation has increased from 53% in 1971 to 72% in 2014, but UK mothers’ participation since 1999 has risen from 56% to only 60%, much slower progress than the post-1990s’ popular idea of successfully combining motherhood and economic labour and an array of policy initiatives might suggest.<sup>4</sup>

Middle-class SAHMs’ representations and experience significantly shape not only their own lives but also those of their children and partners, and of other women in or outside paid employment. Through their (constructed) exemplary roles as wives and mothers, middle-class women historically have been crucial to the reproduction of class society (McRobbie 2009, 132), associated with comfort, success and normality (Kendall 2005). What underlies the mediated attention to and visibility of middle-class SAHMs and how do their mediated representations relate to and correspond with the lived experience of middle-class SAHMs?

### **The study**

To address these questions, in what follows I juxtapose the accounts of UK middle-class SAHMs I interviewed with contemporary representations of middle-class SAHMs in

British and American media.<sup>5</sup> The juxtaposition seeks to illuminate how such messages and images touch and affect women's lives – albeit mostly in indirect, intangible ways, and crucially, what aspects and issues they obscure, exclude and render invisible in the experiences of these privileged women. I deliberately move away from audience studies' interest in the reception of particular media texts, towards the less direct, but meaningful relations between women's lived experience and media representations, while retaining the commitment to listen to their voices (Livingstone 2010).

The selection and analysis of the media representations that I discuss were informed by studies of media representations of motherhood/maternity and work, and by key themes identified by content analysis of UK newspaper five-year coverage of SAHM (Author 2015), and discourse and visual analysis of popular representations (magazines, film, popular fiction, celebrity, advertising, social media) of SAHMs. The analysis of women's lived experiences is based on 22 open-ended, in-depth 90-150 minute interviews I conducted in 2014 with educated late thirties to early fifties, heterosexual, mostly white women, living in London, who left paid employment after having children. There are just over 2 million SAHMs in the UK, of which 16% are professionals, i.e. approximately 320,000 women. While SAHMs in the UK are more likely to be in the lower income group, almost 30% of women who are mothers, who are highly educated and whose partners are in the top earnings quartile, are SAHMs (Paull 2015). One recent study suggests that among UK families deemed as being in the top 20% based on income, use of formal childcare is dropping, with increasing numbers of women leaving the workplace to look after their children (Bingham 2014).

Most interviewees were recruited by emails to members of parent mailing lists of two schools in north London; the rest from snowballing. The interviews aimed at exploring women's life trajectories, and the factors that influenced their decisions to exit the workforce. They were open-ended to allow interviewees to describe what they considered most central,



important and/or difficult in their lives. Interviewees were given a broad description of the study's purpose and asked to recount their life course, from the last couple of years of paid employment to their present situation. They were not questioned about media images or stories, but those mentioned were included in the analysis of representations. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Many women were remarkably frank, sharing what were often very intimate, emotional and painful accounts. Details that might identify interviewees have been removed to guarantee confidentiality and maintain anonymity; the names are pseudonyms.

In what follows, based on the accounts of the women I interviewed, I hope to show how contemporary images of both SAHMs and confident professional women who “lean in” and “have it all” (see McRobbie 2013; Rottenberg 2014), often fail to correspond to women's lives, but at the same time shape their thinking and feeling and, in rather painful ways, reconstruct their deepest desires and sense of self.

## **Encounters**

### ***“Opting out”, leaning back in***

**Meet Alicia Florrick**, lead character in the popular, globally distributed CBS American television drama series *The Good Wife*. In 1994, on graduating from law school at the top of her class at Georgetown University, Alicia worked as a junior associate at a law firm, achieving the highest number of billable hours of any associate. Meantime she met, and later married, Peter Florrick, Cook County State's Attorney. On becoming a mother after only two years working as a lawyer, Alicia quit her job and for the next 13 years was SAHM to their children, Zach and Grace, and a “good wife”.

Alicia breached “the new sexual contract” (McRobbie 2009): she abandoned expectations of a dual role, opting to become the “good mother and wife” responsible for children and domestic life, over participation in the workplace. In her mid-40s, Alicia is forced to seek employment after her husband’s imprisonment following a political corruption and sex scandal. After 13 years outside the workplace, Alicia joins law firm Stern, Lockhart & Gardner as a junior lawyer, through her acquaintance with one of the firm’s partners.

While issues related to her husband’s dubious political and sexual past continuously resurface, and affect his career and relationships following his release, viewers have only few glimpses of Alicia’s SAHM life and identity. In the odd flashbacks she experiences to this period (e.g. Season 1, episode 3) she appears as the quintessential white middle class “Happy Housewife”: her long hair tied back from her face, dressed in a floral dress, and matching pearl earrings and necklace. This and her passive, gracious, unthreatening body language projects a conservative, somewhat subservient mien, reinforcing the “Happy Housewife” image and its two crucial elements: mothering and marriage as an institution described in terms of heterosexual intimacy (Ahmed 2010, 52). *The Good Wife*’s creators, Robert King and Michelle King, admit that the inspiration for the drama and Alicia Florrick’s character was a contemporary version of the Happy Housewife figure: the wife standing silently next to her public figure husband as he apologizes for scandalous misconduct (e.g. Hillary and Bill Clinton, Silda and Eliot Spitzer). “The show began when we asked, ‘What are they thinking?’”, the creators explain.<sup>6</sup>

The drama focuses on what Alicia Florrick is thinking from the moment of her husband’s public apology, but does not deal with what she was thinking and feeling when she quit her job and during her 13 years of full-time motherhood and wifeness. Alicia Florrick seems to have few if any regrets of her years as a SAHM. The show centres on her “re-invented” self as she re-enters the workplace. She is smart, independent and sexually

attractive; 13 years outside the labour market seems not to affect her return to professional life. Alicia re-embarks on a demanding career fairly smoothly; although at the bottom of the career ladder, she easily picks up from where she left off 13 years ago, is confident, and immediately excels. She progresses quickly, juggling her new professional life, motherhood, and the scandal surrounding her husband. She reaps the rewards of full-time motherhood in the form of strong and deep relationships with her teenage children, and is “spared” any guilt about neglecting them in the crucial formative years. Her character recalls contemporary images of career mothers which cater to feminist ideals of empowerment and independence (Gregg 2008). She is the successful businesswoman realising the dream of equality in the workplace and feeling liberated by pursuing her career: she is passionate about her professional work, wins case after case, and is respected and valued by colleagues and clients. Relatively early in her career she is offered a bigger role in the firm, moved to a more spacious office than colleagues at her level, and demands and receives a pay raise. Alicia is seamlessly re-inscribed into the “new sexual contract” and seems “naturally”, fully and glamorously to embody it.

However, Alicia Florrick is neither the 1960s’ (un)Happy Housewife nor the 1980s’ Supermom. Her character presents a more complicated, sophisticated and nuanced representation of women’s capacity to participate, meaningfully and simultaneously, in both the public and private spheres, as successful economic labourers and good mothers. As Suzanna Danuta Walters and Laura Harrison (2014) note, *The Good Wife* to an extent breaks away from normative notions of maternalism and the “Mommy Myth” (Douglas and Michaels 2004), where “good mothering” is predicated on being asexual and working in the home. Rather, the authors argue, the show offers a “truly modern” depiction of a non-normative “aberrant” good mother. Rather than “yet more tedious ‘juggling’ metaphors and high-powered child neglect, [viewers] are treated to a mature, confident, complex woman and

mother” who is “unabashedly sexual and refreshingly professional” and whose “relationship to both work and family is rich and deep” (2014, 47).

However, notwithstanding this, and, precisely because *The Good Wife* is a highly acclaimed popular text which corresponds and responds to wider contemporary and earlier cultural scripts about women, motherhood and work, I want to juxtapose it to the lived experience of (non-fictional) SAHMs. Specifically, I explore how and whether the lived experiences and voices of SAHMs can be understood and situated in relation to popular representations such as Alicia Florrick, which depict women’s “opting out” of and returning to the workplace as individualized and privatized choices, and underline the agency women exert in making these “choices” (Vavrus 2007).

**Meet Geraldine Jones.** Like Alicia Florrick, Geraldine, now in her mid-40s, graduated in law in the 1990s from a prestigious university (Cambridge, UK), after which she qualified and worked for a few years as a barrister. However, she soon realised that she (unlike Florrick) was “not a natural performer” and court work was not for her, and thus retrained as a solicitor. As a newly qualified solicitor in her mid-20s, after fierce competition with highly talented candidates, Geraldine was appointed Legal Manager of one of the UK’s leading hospitals. However, she lasted only a few weeks in what she described as a “full-on heavy duty job.” Soon after starting the job she became pregnant: “The job involved an hour and a half’s commute across town every day, every day, and I was vomiting on every tube platform.” With strong and explicit encouragement from her husband (also a barrister), she concluded “actually, I can’t do this” and a few weeks into her new job she left, though “never wanting to quit forever”. Like Alicia Florrick, for the next 13 years Geraldine was a SAHM.

Also like Alicia Florrick, Geraldine was forced to return to paid employment, but as a consequence of divorce, a far more common, but no less painful event experienced by an

estimated 42% of couples in the UK.<sup>7</sup> Geraldine is now trying to “find fairly comprehensive work, partly from a financial point of view” and, significantly “from a respect point of view.” When she left employment to look after their children, her husband seemed supportive; her SAHM status suited his demanding career and the family's needs. In retrospect, following their divorce, she realized her husband “stopped respecting” her. She was currently looking for “not just a part-time job that would fit around the children, but, more of a career job.” She felt a need for her “own world again” and, crucially, the respect she felt she lost – from her ex-husband, her children and society. However, unlike Alicia Florrick, Geraldine, like many other women in the UK today, is finding that after so many years outside the labour market returning to work and “re-inventing” oneself are extremely difficult and challenging. As several women put it, they are all frustratingly looking for that “elusive job” which pays well, which they can easily fit back into after years outside the workforce.

### ***Invisibility and the “confidence culture”***

The women I interviewed were lawyers, accountants, medical doctors, journalists, teachers, artists and academics. They expressed a strong sense of intense loss of confidence as a consequence of leaving the workforce: “I’m just starting to find my feet again”, Geraldine confessed. “Being at home affected my confidence very badly. I think you get very... you feel very invisible.” Feeling invisible recurred in women’s accounts, and being at “the bottom of the pile” and “the bottom of the heap” were repeated metaphors. One woman spoke of her anxiety at becoming the “invisible generation” in her family tree, overshadowed by her grandmother and mother, both medical doctors. An experience described by several interviewees was of being asked (e.g. at a party) what was their profession, and having people treating them as if they were invisible after they said they were SAHMs.

Such voices and experiences, in my view, should be understood partly in relation to the mediated messages surrounding and touching these women's lives. There is a fantasy, propelled and nourished by images such as Alicia Florrick, and by popular discussion of women at the top "cracking the confidence code" (Kay and Shipman 2014) and "leaning in" (Sandberg 2013), of happy individualized women, "filled with energy, optimism, and self-confidence ... scrambling along the jungle gym [of their careers] and moving towards their long-term dream" (Sandberg 2013, 171). Sandberg (2013, 49) calls for: "a robust image of female success" that is not the "bad mother with a briefcase". Alicia embodies this alternative positive cultural image that Sandberg advocates, a new mythical version of the "good mother" who "leans in": she voices her opinion, makes demands and "sits at the table" as Sandberg (2013, 27) puts it. At the same time, she is a protective mother who is in tune with her children's needs and issues, despite some children-related problems (e.g. her daughter's disappearance following her religious awakening and going to the church to be baptized, her discovery that Zach, her son, has got his girlfriend pregnant).

Of course, there is much to be said about the value and pleasure of waged work – which the women I interviewed clearly recognized and often reminisced about. However, against the continuous injunctions for women to nurture their self-confidence and make themselves noticed, especially in the workplace (Author 2015), and against the emphasis on realizing one's sense of worth and value through waged work, women who once were part of this world, but left it, seem to find it difficult if not impossible to have a sense of self-value, and experience a sense of invisibility, insecurity and lack of confidence.

The account of **Dana Robinson**, a former arts festival manager and SAHM of three boys for the last ten years, neatly illustrates the Alicia Florrick-type fantasy (my emphases):

I'd love to go back [to paid work]. I swung out the other day; I had to have a blood test. At seven thirty in the morning, I looked a mess, and I think because I looked a mess, I thought: "oh, I'd better make myself look better." You know, I'd looked a mess when I first got up! So I look quite, sort of, professional, as I went out. So I thought: "Oh!", and as I swung out of the house, put my key in the lock, I just thought, "oh, this is why people go out to work!" You know, I'd left my husband at home; he was taking them into school that morning. And it felt so liberating...leave it all behind, and just immerse yourself in your work, and be stimulated by that (my underlining).

Dana's view of waged work as liberating and stimulating may be informed by her experience of paid employment in the creative industry, but is significantly also nourished and reinforced by the current "confidence culture" (Author 2015) - which associates the workplace with women's confidence, empowerment and sense of liberation. Curiously, this is at a time when work increasingly is defined by insecurity and precariousness (Ross 2009), and those hit the hardest by the financial crisis in the UK are women (Fawcett Society 2012). Thus, Dana and other women interviewed would love to have Alicia Florrick's "professional look" and the ability to "just leave it all behind" and "immerse" themselves in paid work. However, they can enjoy that "liberating" feeling only momentarily, on the rare occasions that their high-powered successful husbands can look after the children.

### ***Husbands' careers and childcare***

Indeed, a crucial constraint alluded to by Dana (above) and reflected on by other interviewees, is the husband's career and work culture. The majority of the husbands<sup>8</sup> of the women I interviewed were in high-powered, competitive, long hours, high-income jobs and their wives' decisions to leave and not return to paid careers were deeply affected by this.

**Sharon Turner**, a former academic and a SAHM for seven years described it as a “forced choice” (my emphases):

My husband’s job... was one of these city jobs of all hours ... [Leaving my job] was a forced choice. I would say it was a forced choice; it wasn’t my optimal life at all. But, it was like, I felt like if I wanted to stay married...I had to choose this path.

Interestingly, “forced choice” is also the term Pamela Stone (2007, 114-115) uses in her study of American women who “opted out”, to consider the factors constraining and conditioning these women’s choices. Choice, as Joan Williams (2000, 37) points out, “concerns the everyday process of making decisions within constraints.” Sharon’s “choice” to not return to paid employment was made within the huge constraints imposed by her husband’s demanding job, and her concern for the survival of her marriage. Thus, paradoxically, husbands’ high-powered jobs and work cultures, which financially enable women’s “choice” to leave paid employment, at the same time "force" women’s exit of their careers and constrain their ability to return to paid employment. In turn, women’s “choice” to stay at home and look after the children facilitates their husbands’ careers, which benefits and helps sustain a patriarchal capitalist system and re-secures white femininity submission and white masculine domination (see also Author 2015).

Another fundamental burden shouldered mostly by women across all socioeconomic groups is finding, choosing and managing childcare (Vincent et al. 2003; Taylor et al. 2010). Although the women I interviewed were able to afford childcare, it is a basic matter that they have to manage, often on their own, and which substantially interferes with their career and motherhood-related decisions. However, in the mediated public sphere childcare remains largely obscured (Jermyn 2008; Hochschild 1989; Gregg, 2008). Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine (2008, 232) note that “the feminist political dilemmas of struggles for ...



childcare provision have been replaced by narratives of renaissance women who juggle thriving careers (attained through the right modes of education) with motherhood.” The *Good Wife*’s Alicia Florrick is one such renaissance woman who immaculately juggles a flourishing career and motherhood, and for whom childcare is no issue. She has the substantial help of her mother-in-law, who steps in at a moment’s notice and as often as needed, a privilege enjoyed by none of the women I interviewed.

The juxtaposition of contemporary media representations such as Alicia Florrick, and the lived experience of women like Geraldine Jones, Dana Robinson and Sharon Turner, exposes a fundamental chasm between idealized, mediated figures, and SAHMs’ complex, harsh and far less glamorous everyday lives characterized by fundamental gender inequities. Simultaneously, this juxtaposition shows that idealized maternal figures such as Alicia Florrick, and the normative (“feminist”) ideals they carry – empowerment, independence, confidence – however disconnected from women’s lives, penetrate and construct their deepest sense of self. The reflections of Sarah Philips, a former solicitor and now a stay-at-home mother to two girls, exemplify how women evaluate themselves *vis a vis* such cultural messages, and the rather painful effect this can have:

...you feel that you’re kind of [silence] just letting womankind down a bit [crying].

You know, because we have moved on, and you know, women have as much right to work as men, and should be able to work as much as men [...] And just letting down the idea that you are supposed to have it all... you’re supposed to be able to have kids and manage a successful career!

For educated women in their 40s, like Sarah and Geraldine, the lucrative “new sexual contract” embodied by such contemporary mediated figures, remains an unfulfilled fantasy. Like the Smithton women in Janice Radway’s (1984, 60) ground-breaking study, the

accounts of Dana, Geraldine, Sharon and other women hint at “a deep-seated sense of betrayal” and “a certain sadness that many of [them]...seem to share because life has not given them all that it once promised.” Thus, while Walters and Harrison (2014, 47) commend *The Good Wife* for eschewing “yet more tedious ‘juggling’ metaphors,” in reality, many women, unfortunately, continue to experience these tedious realities - not metaphors - and to suffer their consequences.

### ***“Choice” and what it obscures***

As already mentioned, alongside the many images and stories of women who combine successful careers and motherhood, the seemingly contradictory figure of the (predominantly white), middle-class SAHM (who has not returned to the workplace like Alicia Florrick), is receiving growing media visibility.<sup>9</sup> Stay-at-home motherhood is predominantly represented as an independent private choice (Orgad and De Benedictis 2015; Thomson et al. 2011; Vavrus 2007), reinforcing the notion that “becoming a mother is [...] the centre of a female-choice biography” (Thomson et al. 2011, 149). A case that attracted considerable attention from the British press was of 52 year-old **Tracey Wright**, SAHM of two (aged 10 and 16) and ex-wife of a millionaire orthopaedic race-horse surgeon. In February 2015, in a landmark Appeal Court ruling, Tracey Wright was told by Lord Justice Pitchford that she could not reasonably expect her former husband to pay lifelong spousal maintenance

I want to look critically at how the press depicted Tracey Wright, and juxtapose the coverage with SAHMs’ accounts of their “choices” and their consequences. The press, almost unanimously, dubbed the judgement as a “get a job” ruling, a condescending label reinforced by various patronizing and disparaging comments about Tracey Wright. For example, the *London Evening Standard* (February 24, 2015) paraphrased the judge as telling Mrs Wright

to “just get on with it”, while the *Metro*’s (February 23, 2015) sneering headline read “Ex-wife told to stop sponging off millionaire and get a job.” The *Daily Mail*’s (March 28, 2015) Helen Weathers, who usually takes a strong critical stance against the demonization of mothers, also expressed a critical and cynical view of Tracey Wright: “But work she now must, whether she likes it or not. Just like the rest of us who don’t have wealthy spouses to fall back on.” Viv Groskop, writing in the *Guardian*, hailed Pitchford’s ruling as a feminist “triumph for women’s rights” in challenging the idea that a woman should or can be financially dependent on her husband, and sarcastically paraphrased the judge’s words as the sexist and patronising “get a job, love.”

Tracey Wright’s depiction resembles the image of the “rich bitch” in post-feminist dramas: a bourgeois feminine mother who is ineffective, selfish, superficial and pursues material gains single-mindedly (Lee and Moscovitz 2013). Notably, the repulsive tone used to describe the couple’s super-rich lifestyle was directed exclusively at the woman, Tracey Wright. Mr Wright was pictured in either a surgical outfit or a business suit, and described as “a man of integrity” (*Daily Mail*, March 28, 2015), a victim of his “non-working” ex-wife, who had become “sick of the burden” of supporting her (*Metro*, February 23, 2015). Tracey Wright, by contrast, was pictured with unkempt hair and no makeup (failing to subscribe to feminine practices of self-maintenance needed for the performance of normative femininity), and depicted as a self-indulgent, lazy “sponger” who made a personal and abusive choice (e.g. *The Independent*, February 24, 2015, February 25, 2015) “not to work” (*Evening Standard*, February 24, 2015) and “hadn’t raised a finger to do a stroke of paid work” (*Daily Mail*, February 28, 2015).

Tracey Wright’s construction as a lazy “sponger” might be attributable to the commentators’ (and readers’) lack of sympathy for her excessively wealthy lifestyle. Indeed, a recurring sentiment (also in social media and online comments) was that the concessions

Tracey Wright was forced to make following her revised divorce settlement still leave her financially far better off than the majority of divorced women. However, Tracey Wright's depiction as a workshy woman who took the easy route out, relying on her husband's income and seeking a "meal ticket for life" (*Daily Mail*, March 28, 2015) echoes a broader persistent message of mother-blaming (Dejmanee 2015; Lee and Moscovitz 2013) and self-responsibilization. It stresses that leaving paid employment and "choosing" stay at home motherhood is her responsibility and hers alone. Furthermore, Tracey Wright's experience was used as a moral and warning to all "non-working" women: the *Daily Mail* (February 25, 2015) published a piece entitled "Why women just can't go on milking ex-husbands" and a (sadly, not untypical) reader's online response to it asked: "Why should lazy women expect to be supported by their hard working spouse indefinitely?" (comment 104, February 24, 2015, 3:03). These sexist statements, which resonate with a prevalent and stubborn perception that all the women I interviewed described as having encountered, force distinctions, and work to pitch women against each other, thus "disarticulating" the possibility of women coming together (McRobbie 2009).

None of the newspaper reports used Tracey Wright's divorce case to explore the longstanding and consistently underreported issue of mothers' unpaid work. The *Daily Mail* did publish an interview with the divorced woman which discussed her maternal unpaid labour. However, in post-feminist vein, Wright's story was individualized and used to encourage judgements on her personality, volition and appearance, rather than to discuss the structural conditions of patriarchy that sustain gender inequities in the household, and the invisibility and undervaluing of maternal labour. Reporting on Wright's unmanicured "red, gnarly and weather-beaten" hands, the article's title invited readers to pass a judgement on her morality, asking "do YOU have any sympathy?" (*Daily Mail*, March 27, 2015),

encouraging the familiar policing, and criticism of mothering styles, skills and choices (Akass 2006; Lee and Moscovitz, 2013).

The women I interviewed provide a far more complex, nuanced understanding of the work involved in being a SAHM, and its consequences. They often rejected popular stereotypical images of SAHMs, which devalue and trivialise their work, in order to establish the significance and amount of labour their role entails. For example, an image frequently evoked was that of the “cupcake mother”, with women stressing that it is a fictional image detached from their realities, e.g., “when you’re a home carer, it’s not about making the icing on the cake. You know, the work is huge, huge!” Similarly, many interviewees vehemently rejected the popular image of the “woman of leisure” who (like the “rich bitch”) has too much time on her hands and is centred on caring for herself rather than her children, as the following typical quote illustrates: “The stay at home mums don't get to put their feet up and watch television all day long, and give their kids chicken nuggets and chips every night!” In contrast to these images, interviewees often went to great lengths to describe the invisible undervalued marks of SAHMs’ labour:

I am on the go from quarter to seven in the morning to nine o’clock at night, and that’s just always, and also at the weekends, and yet I’m asked constantly, when are you going to work? Are you going back to work? And you think: I’M WORKING. Actually, I’m the schmuck that works for nothing, I work all day long for no pay and it drives me mad (Geraldine Jones).

Nor did any of the reports and commentaries question what might underpin or explain Tracey Wright’s “choice” not to seek paid employment and withdraw into the private sphere, and what such “choice” enabled and for whom. Rather, they obscured how the work she did as a SAHM facilitated her husband’s successful and highly-paid career. For as long as her

choice to stay at home and look after the kids benefited her former husband's high-powered successful career and the capitalist economy more broadly, there seemed no reason to question its legitimacy, morality and appropriateness. It was not until the millionaire husband - approaching retirement - decided to question it, that the media turned a critical eye on his former wife's "choice".

In contrast to Tracey Wright's and similar mediated representations, the women I interviewed were extremely ambivalent about this so-called choice. They were fully aware of the privilege of being able to make the choice to quit their jobs, but doubted whether this decision had been entirely their own. Some referred to government policy, taxation and lack of provision of quality and affordable childcare as factors that shaped their "choice" to leave paid employment. Many reflected on the strong influence of their husbands' careers on their decision. For example, take **Katie Taylor**, a former accountant at a London-based global financial firm, and SAHM for the last six years to two children (aged 7 and 3). Katie had loved her paid job, describing it as "good", "brilliant", "fun" "enjoyable" and "fulfilling", as well as stressful and demanding. Throughout her interview she reminisced with affection, reflecting on the pleasure she took in "the independence of having [her] own money." Katie's husband is an insurance broker at the same firm that employed her. Less than a minute into the interview, she recounted the background to her choice to not return to paid employment after the birth of their first child. Note the oscillation between "I" (*italicised*) and "we" (underlined), the latter referring to a collapsing of her and her husband's voices. Note also how her husband's voice, mediated through her voice (**bolded**), interrupts and reconstructs her account/decision (all emphases are mine):

*I really enjoyed my job...It was good, it was fulfilling, I really enjoyed it...My husband would say, 'you can say that now when you look on it with rose tinted spectacles, but it was long hours.'* There was travel... *I used to come home at*

midnight sometimes in tears... *I* went on maternity leave and *I* think *I* fully intended to go back to work, but *I* suddenly realised that that might not be the best thing for us... When it actually came to it, *I*, umm, we realized that having...once you get over the shock of having a baby and how it changes your life which you never realize beforehand [laughter, imitating her own voice cynically:] ‘that’s fine, *I*’ll be able to go back to work, it would be lovely!’ we realized that it wasn’t going to work. So, **my husband is away a lot** overseas on business and *I* think we just made the decision. *I* mean, my husband said: **‘if you really, really, really want to go back to work, of course we’ll work a way out to do it, but you know, then if you just think that maybe it’s a good idea just to leave, then, you know that would be absolutely brilliant.’** In fact, *I* think **he** probably **preferred** that *I* didn’t go back to work because **he had enough** people who worked for him and with him who did the part-time thing and **he just saw** how difficult it was... So *I* made the decision, it was really difficult actually, *I* had a sort of emotional, psychological trauma over it because you leave your life behind.

This single brief extract from one woman’s account reveals the far more complicated character of the so-called private and personal choice made by women like Katie Taylor, Tracey Wright, Geraldine Jones, Dana Robinson, Sharon Turner and Alicia Florrick. Katie’s account of her former life as a fulfilled, content, active economic labourer was actively reconstructed by her husband; he reminds her how difficult, stressful and unrewarding this pre-stay-at-home-motherhood life was. He constructs the possibility of her returning to paid employment as almost obscene; she has to “really, really, really” want it, contrasted by the "absolutely brilliant" alternative of leaving paid employment and becoming a SAHM, thus reproducing the male breadwinner/female carer model. Thus, while Katie concludes with a

statement that confirms her decision as a personal choice –“I made the decision” – her account exposes some of the hidden gendered power dynamics, which, in significant ways, shaped this choice, and the “emotional and psychological trauma” she suffered and had to cope with for the next years of her life, which this choice entailed. However, as illustrated by the example of Tracey Wright’s news coverage, and borne out by other studies of UK and US media, the media tend to depict women’s decision to leave paid employment almost exclusively in terms of a personal choice, with little mention of the barriers, constraints or regrets involved (Faludi 1991; Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Orgad and De Benedictis 2015; Williams 2000). The mediated figure of Alicia Florrick in *The Good Wife* occasionally alludes to the influence on her “choice” to “opt out”, of her husband’s high-flying and demanding career, though I would argue that Alicia’s smooth and successful return to the workplace after 13 years largely masks the reasons for and painful consequences of this choice.

## **Conclusion**

In *Gender and the Media*, Rosalind Gill (2007, 270) asks what kind of strategies would be appropriate for critiquing contemporary media representations.<sup>10</sup> This paper suggests that a critical study of the relationship between media representations and women’s lived experience, through their juxtaposition, might be one strategy. The juxtaposition uncovers the power of how “what is ‘out there’ gets ‘in here’ to reconstruct our deepest yearnings and sense of self” (Gill 2011, 66). It throws into relief the fantasies that media representations nourish, such as women’s ability to effect a smooth return to paid employment after a long career break and be “liberated” by successful careers, and the normative ideas and judgements media texts prescribe about stay-at-home motherhood as a



personal (somewhat self-indulgent) “choice”. These fantasies, ideas and judgements, are produced and circulated in and through a variety of mediated texts. Though these representations may not be consumed by all women directly (as audience research would have it), they are part of a cultural sphere that shapes their self-understanding and feelings in significant and often painful ways.

The juxtaposition of media representations and women’s lived experience highlights the gulf between the two, and what representations preclude and render invisible. In particular, the analysis exposed three central aspects that are largely hidden in current representations of SAHMs, namely: (1) the important influence of husbands’ demanding careers and work cultures on women’s “choices” to leave and not return to paid employment; (2) the impact of childcare (or its impossibility) on women’s careers and decisions to leave paid employment; (3) the immense domestic and maternal labour women carry out, which remains unpaid, unreported and socially devalued.

As I have argued and other studies (cited earlier) corroborate, these crucial aspects, and the experiences they produce, receive limited attention in the media. Their obscuring and marginalization are furthered by presentations of women’s decisions and feelings as private and personal. *The Good Wife* and other contemporary media texts present women’s capacity to return to work after a time away from the labour market (or equally women’s ability to reach senior leadership positions) as predominantly a matter of their ability to crack “the confidence code” (Kay and Shipman 2014), be daring, assertive and “lean in” (McRobbie 2013; Gill and Elias 2014; Rottenberg 2014). Tracey Wright’s and other women’s work and life decisions are often presented as private choices and personal mistakes, the message being that if they chose to “opt out” of the workplace, they have only themselves to blame for their “foolish folly” – as one *Guardian* commentator put it (February 24, 2015). However, the contrast between such mediated representations and women’s accounts exposes how the

decisions and the anxieties, frustrations, disappointments, pleasures, and desires that SAHMs experience as private and personal, are shaped by and in relation to a wider environment in which cultural messages and media representations play a central role. Feminist media research has an important role in exposing and explaining what and who forces the “choices” women make; how it is that it is almost always women who make these choices; how such “choices” enable and foster a patriarchal unequal capitalist system and, finally, how these choices could be part of and could contribute to a more equal system. Listening to women’s voices and the stories they tell, should help to inform accounts of the social structures of inequality that condition their subjectivities, and how these structures, rather than women, might be re-invented.

The juxtaposition of mediated representations and middle-class SAHMs’ lived experience reveals how gender subordination and inequality operate in the lives of a minority group of socioeconomically privileged women. The women I interviewed grew up in England during the 1960s and 1970s in a very different society, culture and political reality than that of Hubback’s (1957) *British Wives Who Went to College* and Friedan’s (1963) *American “Happy Housewives”*. However, against post-feminist culture’s promise of “the new sexual contract” and celebration of women’s capacity, confidence and empowerment, the women I interviewed, like Hubback’s and Friedan’s housewives (notwithstanding the differences), feel that their voices are silenced and silent in the public, and sometimes also in their private spheres. For some, the research interview, conducted six, seven, and even fifteen years after they left the workplace, was a rare opportunity to reflect on their decisions and voice some of the silent or silenced questions about its motivations and consequences for their own, their children’s and their families’ lives and, as one put it, “for womankind.” Though clearly privileged, the lives women described are simultaneously overwhelmingly constrained. If these privileged “smart, talented, ambitious, well-educated women who, if they chose to do

so, could start an economic revolution” (Vavrus 2007, 59), experience subjection, and feel invisible and silent, arguably other women – who cannot afford not to be in paid employment, whose partners earn less, or who have no partner, and who did not enjoy higher education– are likely to find it harder still.<sup>11</sup>

The majority of the women I interviewed wanted to return to paid employment and, as one of them put it, to “reinvent” themselves, like Alicia Florrick did. I want to conclude with a comment from **Janet Brown**, a 43-year-old mother of two, who had left her job as a theatre costume maker 11 years earlier on the birth of her first child:

The family life is set up on me being here as a taxi service, as a collection point... I can potentially go back to costume work at a later date... but his [my husband's] is a career, and as most careers are, you can't say no to stuff, and so that is quite a natural thing [that I remain a SAHM]. I have to throw the table over and go: 'Mum wants a job! You know, you can't all just depend on me anymore. Mum wants a job!'

Janet, and many other women who may desire to overturn the table, instead are continuing to silently wipe it. This article has sought to shed light on the experiences of these women in order to better understand how they relate to and often are disconnected from their mediated representations, and how this disconnect may be contributing to enhancing and sustaining their silence and silencing. In voicing these women's experiences and making the lived experiences of gender inequality visible and audible, I hope that this study and other feminist research will help to overturn the table.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> While the majority of working class women always undertook some kind of paid work outside the home, the growing number of middle-class families during the 1920s resulted in consignment of the majority of middle-class women to the role of housewives. Many middle-class women returned to full-time occupations during the Second World War, but were forced to return to the home after the war, and it was only during the late 1960s and 1970s that they re-entered the labour force in substantial numbers.

<sup>2</sup> For UK figures, see Paull 2014; for US figures see: [http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/facts\\_over\\_time.htm](http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/facts_over_time.htm)

<sup>3</sup> For two exceptions, see Descartes and Kottak (2009), and Thomson et. al (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For a review of these initiatives see Paull 2014.

<sup>5</sup> All examples of American media representations I refer to were mentioned by interviewees. More generally, as noted by Tasker and Negra (2007, 13), there is a high degree of “discursive harmony” between UK and US representations.

<sup>6</sup> “The Good Wife: Non-lawyers behind that lawyer show” (interview with series creators Michelle and Robert King), *BitterLawyer.com*, January 4, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/divorces-in-england-and-wales/2011/sty-what-percentage-of-marriages-end-in-divorce.html>

<sup>8</sup> All the women I interviewed are or were in a heterosexual marriage.

<sup>9</sup> For example, a recent opinion column in the New York Times (May 16, 2015) focusing on “the Glam SAHMs” (glamorous stay-at-home-mothers) in Upper East Side New York, provoked a lively online discussion including 291 comments and several response articles.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Gallagher (2014, 28) also refers to this question posed by Gill (2007).

<sup>11</sup> I draw on Hochschild (1989, 19) who makes a similar argument about the middle-class couples she studied.