

Postfeminism's Impact on Gendered labour

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Since the advent of postfeminist culture in the 1990s, women's desire has often been described as wanting to return to a domestic, feminine lifestyle in which women are portrayed as "keen to re-embrace the title of housewife and re-experience the joys of a 'new femininity'" (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 57). In movie and TV programs such as *Footballer's Wives* (2002-2006), *The Real Housewives* franchise, and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), the rebranding of domestic labor as a place of enjoyment and liberty expressed through popular culture rejects feminist worries about tedious, repetitive, and exploitative housework.

As Stephanie Genz argues, "new traditionalism centralises women's apparently full knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favour of family values. The domestic sphere is rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and independence, far removed from its previous connotations of drudgery and confinement" (Genz, 2009: 54). Therefore, by addressing women as freely choosing subjects, domestic labour is presented as a fulfilling and enjoyable role. More

than presenting a new perspective on domestic labour, postfeminism also redefines the role of the housewife as a viable aspiration for modern women to achieve. One of the ways the perspective of the housewife has shifted in recent years is by presenting the housewife as an identity, not a job.

By “drawing on poststructuralist understandings of the performativity of identity (...) the housewife has come to be seen as an inflexibly gendered "identity" rather than a form of gendered labour” (Gillis and Hollows, 2009: 7). Therefore, popular media that is oriented around the housewife figure tends to focus more on the lavish lifestyles, feisty characters, and consumer tendencies these women can afford, rather than the cooking, cleaning and child-rearing labour they (supposedly) perform.

The limited changes of the last twenty years, and the persistent demand for further change, are disliked, feared and resented by many men and women who advocate a return to ‘traditional’ roles and attitudes. Women and men, calling for a resurgence of ‘old values’ propose rigidly defined roles for females and males, in which the public and private realms are distinctly segregated. Thus, men enter the workforce to earn the ‘family’ wage and provide for their wives and children while women cook, clean, support and service their husbands and children in the home. As Overholser concludes, ‘to call that post-feminism is only to give sexism a subtler name’ (ibid.).

Similarly, criticising feminism for oppressing men has become positively fashionable. Camille Paglia has established an international reputation in dismissing contemporary feminists as whiners and ‘namby-pamby, wishy-washy little twits’ (S. Moore, 1992). She is probably most notorious for her statement that ‘if civilisation has been left in female hands we would still be living in grass huts’ (Heller, 1992p.3).

Younger generations of women have related their feelings of alienation from feminism. ‘Third wave’ feminists have inherited institutions which profess to have adopted equal opportunities policies but which intrinsically have not changed. In real terms, these women do not directly experience the successes that have been expected from the struggles and consequent reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these young women feel, and have been, castigated by

older feminists, for not doing enough to challenge the structures which perpetuate and reinforce inequality.

‘Post-feminist’ ideology, fuelled by the political arguments of the New Right, has been given credence through the development of artificial divisions and categories of feminism. Implicitly this has placed each cohesive and identifiable strand of feminist thought in a position of competition and conflict with others in a bid to assert the primacy of a specific issue or standpoint.

The other main focus of women’s unpaid labour in the home is the task of caring. The notion of caring as a ‘natural’ role for women overlooks a deep-rooted, gendered construction of the caring activity. It is invariably restricted to specific social relations involving women as wives, mothers, daughters, neighbours, friends. Janet Finch and Dulcie Groves(1983 p.229) state that, ‘there is an important sense in which cultural pressures to provide care apply to all women, but those who are married or co-habiting are particularly vulnerable to such pressures’.

Women’s unpaid domestic labour enables men to work long hours, regardless of their class, take on overtime, and become involved in work-related activities in the evenings and at weekends. These include meetings, conferences, courses and social events. Men also often claim the need to work undisturbed at home. Although it is widely accepted that men have a ‘right’ to regular, planned leisure time away from the home and family women can claim no such ‘right’.

For most women interviewed, the expectations of a relationship were similar. They revolved around sharing, understanding, honesty and respect. Most of the women identified a need for mutual independence. Where expectations differed there were difficulties, occasionally insurmountable.

At best ‘post-feminism’ is a concept appropriate to professional women. It is only these women who are in a position to make ‘choices’ about whether or not to follow a career and combine it with motherhood. They are the women whose occupations provide the financial resources to ‘buy-in’ high quality child-care and domestic support. Alternatively they are the women who are in a position to reject the opportunities open to them, favouring a return to traditional roles. Either way, the options available to them are not available to most women.

The majority of women do not experience the opportunities open to white, heterosexual, middle-class women. As Nancy K Miller (cited in Modleski, 1992p.22) states ‘only those who have it can play with not having it’.

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