



THIS RECESSION WAS INITIALLY DUBBED THE 'MAN-CESSION' BECAUSE OF THE DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF MEN WHO'D LOST THEIR JOBS. BUT FOUR YEARS ON, IT'S WORKING WOMEN WHO ARE BEING TOLD TO RETURN TO THE KITCHEN

WORDS TABITHA LASLEY

'Something I thought was funny, when I started to spend time in on-line communities, was that when a lot of mothers signed off, their handle names were "so-and-so's mom" or "mom of three". It was like they didn't have any identity outside of their parenting.' Jessica Valenti has spent a lot of time on forums and discussion threads lately, researching her book *Why Have Kids?*. A new mother herself, she wanted to root out the reasons women had children, when the dogged pursuit of 'having it all' was clearly making so many of them miserable. What she found was a coterie of women who seemed happy to throw most of it away, carelessly sublimating their own identities, claiming to see themselves as mothers, first and foremost. But could this just be a sane response to the current political climate? Ever since the recession hit, retrograde ideas on the role of women have been gaining purchase. And governments are rolling out sepia-tinted policies that make it increasingly difficult for mothers to be anything but that.

In the UK, they've slashed the benefits, the public services and the public sector itself, which employs

THE WAR ON WORKING WOMEN

a huge number of women through flexible working practices. Since 2009, female unemployment has grown by 19,1 per cent, while male unemployment is up just 0,32 per cent. Perhaps this shouldn't come as a shock though, since the Work and Pensions Secretary is Iain Duncan Smith, a man who's on the record as saying he believes the best thing a woman can do for her children is give up work for the first three years of their lives.

In the US, Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate who stood against Obama in the most recent Presidential elections, spent his campaign banging the same drum, insisting it was essential for at least one parent to stay at home (given his stance on equal pay and various other topics, there are no prizes for guessing which one he meant). Seemingly ignoring the economic implications of such a move, he wanted to repeal funding for Planned Parenthood and overturn the Supreme Court case that legalized abortion. In the event of things, he lost; what's telling is that a candidate with these stated intentions got so far in the first place. He refused to pledge his support to the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, one of the first bills Obama signed after taking

office. When challenged on this, he claimed he'd been searching for female cabinet members and had 'binders full of women' in his office. He meant to offer this as proof of his progressive stance, but managed to confirm feminist suspicions: that under Romney, women in office would be an exercise in box ticking.

As for South Africa, we have some of the most forward-thinking labour legislation in the world, so theoretically working women should enjoy a measure of protection. But according to Janine Hicks, Commissioner for Gender Equality, in practice this isn't the case. The figures she quotes are sobering: 'A recent global study by ... Regus (a global work-space provider) found that South African companies are increasingly reluctant to hire mothers. The 2011 study says that only 31 per cent of the companies polled intended to hire mothers, while 51 per cent said they were not prepared to. The same study also showed that 32 per cent of the South African companies were concerned about rehiring returning mothers, apparently because they were concerned that their skills might be "outdated"'. Hicks says equal pay is still an 'elusive ideal', in spite of two years of employment-equity initiatives. South Africa's gender wage gap currently stands at a whopping 33,5 per cent (compared with the global average of 22,4 per cent). Tellingly, the gap gets much wider for women with children.

Liberal thinking invariably loses ground in times of recession. Partly, this is an atavistic response. In times of stress, we tend to favour 'heuristics': quick and easy rules-of-thumb. Reactionary rhetoric, with its moral absolutes, is simply easier to grasp. And at times like these, politicians will use the carrot of economic recovery to justify rolling back on labour legislation. We're told that things like maternity leave and equal pay are not basic rights but unaffordable luxuries, and that the important thing is to free up the market so business can drive growth. 'It's always dressed up as a very pro-business argument,' says Dr Suzanne Doyle-Morris, author of *Female Breadwinners: How They Make Relationships Work and Why They Are The Future Of the Modern Workforce*. 'But I don't think it makes any economic sense. The reality is that families rely on women's incomes. People see equal-pay legislation as something that just benefits women but actually, if your wife is not getting paid as much as her male colleagues, it will affect you too.'

And whatever certain politicians would have us believe, research shows there's no harm to children of working mothers, provided they're placed in high-quality care. A longitudinal study by University College London published last year

31% of the companies polled intended to hire mothers, while 51% said they were not prepared to



The Lobby of Parliament by UK Feminista – women hold placards in front of Big Ben, Westminster, London in October 2012. One says, 'A woman's place is in the board room.' UK Feminista supports people in campaigning for a world in which women and men are equal.



found that girls appeared to gain something from seeing their mothers go to work. 'Good-quality day care is far better than poor-quality maternal care,' explains Doyle-Morris. 'If the mother is staying home because she has to, not because she wants to, the kids will pick up on that. Women who are fulfilled make better parents.'

But despite the clear benefits when both parents are in gainful employment, working mothers still feel guilt: about leaving their children with someone else; about leaving the office at 5pm; even, as Valenti found when researching her book, about feeling underwhelmed by the experience of motherhood itself. 'The guilt comes from a lot

of different places,' she says. 'From culture, from politics. It comes from us as well. That's a larger problem - the internalized sexism we have towards ourselves. Women have been taught to direct their anger [and] dissatisfaction inward instead of outward.'

For these reasons, we still think of women who seek to have 'it all' - a job and a career - as greedy, although men get it all as a matter of course. In a direct inversion of the female trajectory, their careers flourish with each new addition to the family; men in senior managerial roles who have children tend to earn more on average than those who don't.

After all this, you'd be forgiven for thinking that young women have it comparatively easy. If only. Girls in their early twenties may not have to worry about flexible working hours and feeling like the world's worst mother just yet, but they have their own pressing set of concerns. Graduate jobs are now regarded as a relic from another age, while a recent survey by the Intern Bridge found that

women were 77 per cent more likely to be working in unpaid internships than men. 'The rise of unpaid internships as the norm is a huge problem,' says Holly Baxter, editor of feminist blog The Vagenda. 'Some of our friends who graduated at the same time as us have been working unpaid for months, or even years, in pursuit of their dream job. Meanwhile, the recession has led to an increase in nepotism, which has kept unconnected people out of the workplace.' The 'soft' sectors that female graduates have traditionally gravitated towards - publishing, PR, fashion, charity - are not only beset by nepotism, but much less likely to offer paid work experience than male-dominated industries.

The same Intern Bridge survey found that 87 per cent of undergraduates studying engineering and computer science were offered paid internships, as opposed to 40 per cent of humanities students. Young men also seem to have a clearer idea of their own worth. They place more importance on salaries, for a start (a 2010 survey by financial services group Friends Provident found that 37 per cent of men thought it was the most important consideration when taking a job, as opposed to 24 per cent of women) and they're better at asking for pay rises (Sara Laschever, author of *Why Women Don't Ask*, says that on average, men's targets tend to be around 30 per cent higher than women's).

It's almost enough to make you want to give up and get back in the kitchen. And perhaps it would be, if it weren't for one small but significant change. While we've been waiting for the green shoots of recovery, we've witnessed something even more promising - the growth of grassroots feminism. A decade ago, it was relatively rare for a young woman to identify herself as a feminist. Back then, it was modish for girls to accompany their boyfriends to lap-dancing clubs, consume pornography, 'confess' to fancying their friends. Young women were expected to objectify themselves, and others, behaviour Ariel Levy skewered in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Feminism was seen as an anachronism, too closely allied to hairy armpits and unattractive shouting to be hot. Women, cushioned by boom-years optimism and a buoyant economy, felt they didn't need it any more. Why would they? They'd won all their battles.

Except, of course, they hadn't. And it took only a short period of economic stagnation before politicians were attempting to snatch back the gains they'd made, in the name of growth. 'The recession has seen an increase in conservative

Graduate jobs are now regarded as a relic from another age, while a recent survey by the Intern Bridge found that women were

77%

more likely to be working in unpaid internships than men

Mitt Romney, who lost against Obama in the most recent Presidential elections, wanted to repeal funding for Planned Parenthood and overturn the Supreme Court case that legalized abortion.



values,' confirms Baxter. 'Women are beginning to feel their autonomy is once again under attack. This has led to an increase of activism. Social media outlets like Twitter have given people a place to have their voices heard and to discuss issues that are important to them.' Valenti agrees, saying, 'It used to be that if you were a feminist, if you went to a feminist meeting, or wrote a feminist magazine, it's because you were already interested in feminism and sought it out. With the internet, it's more easily accessible. I always thought [that] if younger women were exposed to what feminism was about, they'd be much more likely to be involved. And I think that's what we're actually seeing happening on line.'

A cursory look at Twitter will bear this out: young women are getting militant again, mobilizing on every front and calling for a ban on topless models in tabloid newspapers. Blogs like *The Vagenda* and *Jezebel* are racking up millions of hits. Popular feminist literature is flying off the shelves: Valenti's *Why Have Kids?*, Kat Banyard's *The Equality Illusion*, Caitlin Moran's *How to be a Woman*. As the placards at last year's SlutWalks had it: Feminism is back, by popular demand. The longer this recession grinds

on, the harder we're going to have to fight to maintain the rights our mothers marched for 40 years ago. The static struggle to hang on to what we've already got, when we should be pushing forward, will be tough and frustrating. But the alternative - sleepwalking our way back into the worst aspects of the gender roles of the past, eschewing control over our money, our bodies and our lives and defining ourselves purely in

terms of the children we produce - doesn't bear thinking about. **mc**

HARDSHIP POSTS: THE WORST PLACES IN THE WORLD TO BE A WORKING WOMAN

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia is home to the lowest female earners in the world: women earn \$7 157 (about R62 300), compared with men's \$36 727 (about R319 700). The country has never sent a female athlete to the Olympics and bans girls from sports in state schools. It's also the only country in the world that doesn't allow women to drive.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan's labour force is made up of four times as many men as women. The country is ranked 133rd out of the 134 countries on the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report list of women's economic participation. Though rising inflation is now forcing some women to enter the service industry, they face continual harassment, not only from strangers but even from their own families. Men so frequently confiscate their sisters' work uniforms that McDonald's now provides them with three sets.

YEMEN

Yemen has the lowest ratio of women in highly skilled jobs in the world - just two per cent. In the past six years, it has closed only 32 per cent of its economic gender gap. There are no female members of parliament, and a woman has only a one-in-three chance of being able to read and write (71 per cent of Yemeni women are illiterate, as opposed to 31 per cent of men).