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Resilience is a feminist issue: A response to Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* in the context of Britain during the coronavirus pandemic

Hannah Hamad, Cardiff University, hamadh2@cardiff.ac.uk

Angela McRobbie's latest book *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* (2020) is a characteristically feminist, state-of-the-nation account of intersections of gender, media and culture in neoliberal Britain. It was written at the pre-dawn, as it turned out, of the extraordinary levels of crisis into which Britain and the rest of the world were plunged by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

Before responding to some of the issues that arise from book itself, I will first situate it in the context of McRobbie's larger body of body of work in the field of feminist media and cultural studies. This began, of course, with her work at Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, some of it as part of the Women's Studies Group (see for example McRobbie in Women's Studies Group, 1978), and which culminated in the landmark publication of *Feminism and Youth Culture* (McRobbie, 1991), which was highly influential to the formation of the fields of girlhood studies and girl culture studies. Equally impactful in the following decade, especially with regard to the definitional, conceptual and terrain-mapping working that it did as part of the first wave of feminist criticism of postfeminist culture, was McRobbie's essay 'Post-feminism and popular culture'. This was originally published in *Feminist Media Studies* journal in 2004, but I first encountered it during the production of Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's *Interrogating Postfeminism* at which time I was a postgraduate student working on Tasker and Negra's book as project assistant. Here, McRobbie's piece was re-published under a slightly different title (2007), before going on to appear as the first of the series of essays that comprised McRobbie's own book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009). I draw attention to the latter in particular on the grounds that there are many ways in which *The Aftermath of Feminism* and *Feminism and the Politics of*

Resilience make for crucial companion reading. Both books are fundamentally concerned with the relationship between gender, media, culture, politics and social change at the different historical conjunctures that they respectively deal with.

In the case of the former, this historical conjuncture includes the timeframe for the phenomenon that spans what we commonly refer to in feminist media and cultural studies as ‘millennial postfeminism’, i.e. the mid-90s through to the onset of the financial crisis in the following decade, and later characterised by McRobbie in *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* as “the de-politicizing... ethos of female individualism where feminism was shunned as old and no longer needed” (2020, p. 43). And in the case of the latter book, the historical conjuncture most pointedly in question encompasses the period since the onset of the austerity programme initiated in the UK by the coalition government of 2010, and further back to the recession that ensued from the global financial crisis of 2007-8. These shifting social, economic and cultural conditions made for a context in which, as McRobbie writes, “feminism can now be accommodated, and recognized as socially relevant... but also managed, controlled and... possessed... [in ways] that will occasion new modes of governmentality.” (Ibid., p. 43)

Turning now though to respond to a small selection of the issues raised by *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* well over a year on (at the time of writing, in June 2020) from its initial publication, it behoves us to think about the essays that comprise the book, and about the very notion of ‘resilience,’ in the context of our year (and counting) spent living through the Covid-19 pandemic. In her own remarks about the book at the panel discussion from which this special section developed, McRobbie has herself gestured towards the extent to which some of the issues she deals with in its pages have taken on new levels of urgency in the context of the coronavirus crisis (McRobbie, 2021); and some of them must necessarily be seen in a new light as a result of it. These include, for example, the extent to which and the ways in which working class women of colour have been deleteriously impacted by the logic of neoliberalism that continues to operate under the

ideologically disingenuous banner of 'resilience.' Relatedly, in concluding remarks that are offered up in the book's final pages, McRobbie highlights that in order to undo the aforementioned "feminine incarceration effect" as she terms it (2020, p. 2) whereby society's most vulnerable members (frequently poor women of colour and single mothers) are prevented by a mutually reinforcing combination of vindictive government policy and perniciously dehumanizing media discourse from being able to alleviate their suffering, or from being able to alter their derogated circumstances, "radical social change" is required (2020, p. 122). This is imagined as a kind of radical social change that envisions a society defined by its capacity and determination to care (on this see The Care Collective, 2020), and to ameliorate the social experiences and prospects for improved living conditions of all those in poverty, but with a particular focus by McRobbie on the de-stigmatisation of single mothers.

In sketching out some of the ways that this radically altered society might look, McRobbie proposes "Flexible hours, working from home, and reduced working times" all with a view to being able to "free up people, and especially parents and other family members, to be more involved in the upbringing of children in a community environment" (2020, p. 122). The onset of the pandemic across the early months of 2020 unexpectedly gave rise to a heretofore unimaginable set of opportunities to institute and normalize some of these working practices, albeit the prospect of a community environment in which to care for children all but disappeared given the requirement in the pandemic for us to retreat to our atomised household units. Sure enough, for many people, the unplanned move to so-called 'working-from-home' (others have preferred to call it 'living-at-work', or similar) was accompanied by quick assurances from employers of the benefits of flexibility (see COVID-19 and flexible working, 2020), and of revised and managed expectations for what it was now possible to do in a given work day, and in what time frame (see Coronavirus [COVID-19], 2020).

But instead, in the context of the pandemic, what many home workers have experienced is the opposite of McRobbie's call for a reimagined approach to economic distribution with a view to

ameliorating the circumstances of society's most vulnerable. For many in the new home working economy, more work is being done over more hours (Osborne, 2021), and in circumstances that re-intensify the existing inequalities in gendered divisions of domestic labour (Zamberlan et al, 2021). Meanwhile, although new light is continually being shed, as a result of our confinement to our homes, on the ongoing social problem of domestic violence, especially that perpetrated by men against women (Townsend, 2020), it remains the case that the increased visibility of this issue has yet to translate into the materialisation of the resources required to begin to address it. Domestic violence services remain catastrophically under-funded.

As the dust began to settle on the locked-down situation it quickly became clear that the rhetoric of resilience would itself prove resilient, as it was mobilised as a 'shock doctrine' tactic (Klein 2007) to negotiate consent for new regimes, and to manage people's experiences of various kinds of loss, trauma and circumstantial difficulty, in ways designed to keep us working, keep us biddable and keep us compliant. It was also immediately discursively mobilised in service to capitalism as advertisers seized on the opportunity to negotiate resilience rhetoric as a means to sell products. A noteworthy early example in the UK was Virgin Media's April 2020 'Stay Home, Stay Safe, Stay Connected' campaign for its broadband service, in which a montage of vlog material depicts the attempts of Virgin Media users across the UK to remain upbeat, active and communicative with one another from within their homes, while being urged to "keep your head up" and "keep your heart strong" through the lyrics of its emotionally charged soundtrack song by British singer-songwriter Ben Howard. It is therefore not highlighting anything that is not already manifestly visible to say that the ways in which 'resilience' rhetoric and discourse now circulates through the radically changed spheres that we now inhabit at home, and in work, have intensified dramatically in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. The neoliberal propaganda of self-governance is thus once again being redeployed in service to market logics and to the privileging of the ostensible health of the economy over the health of the population, and disproportionately at the expense of women doing both public and private sphere work within the home (Ferber and Swindells, 2021). Or, as McRobbie has

highlighted in her powerful essay about her experience of being treated for the virus, as members of the so-called “essential services” (2021) for who remaining ‘resilient’ in the face of life-threatening occupational hazards and risking (and in many cases losing) their lives became a quotidian matter of fact (Covid-19 Resource Centre, 2020). Meanwhile, their labour continues to be devalued as part of what McRobbie calls the “incarceration effect” (2020, p. 2).

It is thus an understatement to say that ‘resilience’ remains a feminist issue in the context of Covid-19. If anything, the new heights to which the life-and-death stakes of our compliance with, or consent to adhere to the imperatives and logics of the government’s and employers’ resilience agendas or training initiatives have been raised only exacerbate and bring into more vivid view the classed, gendered and racialised inequalities that blighted society before it. It is these entrenched inequalities that McRobbie expounds at length across the four essays in *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*. For and on behalf of those no longer with us to who the ambulances were not sent, the tests were not administered, the Personal Protective Equipment was not provided, or who worked low-wage service or hospitality jobs at the mass gatherings that were not cancelled, the rhetoric of resilience rings hollow.

Author bio

Hannah Hamad is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Cardiff University, School of Journalism, Media and Culture. She is the author of *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary US Film: Framing Fatherhood* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014) and *Film, Feminism and Rape Culture in the Yorkshire Ripper Years* (London: BFI, forthcoming 2023). She is a member of the editorial collective of *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, and is the co-founder and co-coordinator with Anthea Taylor of the Feminist Celebrity Studies international research network.

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