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WOMEN, THE ECONOMY AND NEWS: ANALYSIS OF THE 2008 U.S. PRIMARY COVERAGE

CAROLYN M. BYERLY*

The issue is whether . . . as critics suggest, media coverage of women in America reinforces rather than challenges the dominant culture, and thereby contributes to women's marginalization in public life.

Pippa Norris (1997)

INTRODUCTION

Months before the collapse of major financial institutions in September 2008, there was already considerable national angst about the stability of the United States economy. That angst created an atmosphere of tension in the primary election season, between January and June, when Democratic and Republican parties would choose their respective presidential candidates. It also shaped the views and political behavior of an increasingly aroused but wary electorate.

Public opinion research published in early 2008 showed that American women, in particular, were fed up with the status quo in United States politics.¹ They blamed President Bush for hard times, and they wanted to see a change in the White House. Topping their list of concerns was the economy. Recognizing the importance of women's votes in the 2008 election, a wide field of presidential candidates in both Democratic and Republican parties began to address gender issues in their campaigns.

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¹ See Celinda Lake & Matt Price, *Snapshot: The Woman's Vote, 2008*, MS. MAGAZINE, Spring 2008, at 39-41, available at http://www.ms magazine.com/spring2008/reallyWant_celindaLake.asp (documenting that three-quarters of women believe the country is on the wrong track); see also Sharon Johnson, *Rough Economy Leaves Women Looking Out for No. 1*, WOMEN'S ENEWS, June 5, 2008, <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3626> ("Washington Post surveys show that over half of primary voters said the economy was the most critical problem facing the nation. Pollster Celinda Lake says women are at the forefront of that trend.").

Most obviously were the presumed top Democratic candidates, Hillary Rodham Clinton, a woman, and Barack Obama, an African-American man, both representing “firsts” in U.S. presidential politics. The 2008 primary season, which began in January, would be infused with gender and race in ways that no other previous season had in U.S. history.

According to public opinion research by Celinda Lake and Matt Price of Lake Research Partners, which was reported in the Spring 2008 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, nearly 80% of the 553 American women they polled (as compared to 68% of men) described their current economic situation as fair or poor at the beginning of 2008.² For non-white women, the economic concerns were even higher, at 88%. Worried not just about themselves, but also their children, more than half of the women these researchers spoke to said they were “not optimistic” about their children’s future.³ Unemployment, job scarcity, job (in)security, lack of health benefits, little or no savings to fall back on, and chronic poverty were some of the specific economic problems that American women said worried them as the presidential campaign moved into primary election season in spring 2008.⁴

These data were supported by other evidence. Women had suffered disproportionately under what feminist economist Heidi Hartmann called “shaky economic times.” Citing research by Yankelovich, Hartmann said that 1 in 5 women lacked money to fill a prescription, 1 in 8 lacked money to take a sick child to a doctor, and 1 in 14 had gone hungry in the past year.⁵ Hartmann, the president of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research in Washington, D.C., also noted that women’s economic worries cut across social classes, with those in higher income brackets (over \$90,000) more worried than men about the reduction or disappearance of social security benefits. Analyzing recent census data, the organization Women’s Voices, Women’s Vote reported that unmarried working women were the most vulnerable of all to pay inequity in the workplace. In 2008, women still earned only 56 cents to every dollar earned by men. In terms

² Lake & Price, *supra* note 1, at 39. The 1,013 persons polled were selected from a random sample, and results may therefore be generalized to the larger population. The margin of error was 4.4%. Personal Communication from Matt Price (Oct. 20, 2008).

³ See Lake & Price, *supra* note 1, at 39 (indicating that only 35% of women think that their children will be better off than their parents).

⁴ See Johnson, *supra* note 1 (noting one woman’s concern that her rising mortgage and gas bill will zap her potential to save money); see also Lake & Price, *supra* note 2, at 39-41 (citing rising health care costs as women’s top economic concern).

⁵ Heidi Hartmann, *Shaky Economic Times are Shakier for Women*, WMC, June 16, 2008, <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/ex/061608.html> (quoting YANKELOVICH, INC., THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION AMERICAN WORKER SURVEY 12-14 (2007), http://www.rockfound.org/initiatives/amer_workers/american_worker_survey.pdf).

of personal earnings, the group found that unmarried women earned only \$37,264 annually, compared to unmarried men's annual income of \$42,843 – a difference of nearly \$6,000.⁶

According to U.S. census data, the situation was most dire in 2008 for the 15 million American women living in poverty, the majority of whom were Black, Hispanic, single working mothers, and/or elderly.⁷ Poverty had worsened among women since the 1990s, after welfare ended under then-President Clinton. A shrinking economy under President George W. Bush had further increased unemployment and the cost of living.

Such consistent research findings about women's expressed concerns, supported by empirical data, illustrate the truth and detail of women's claims. The findings also suggest that women met the news criterion "people most impacted," which is one of the determinants the industry uses to decide what will become news. After all, women's centrality to the election had already been established as the nation moved into and through state primaries. Women's votes were increasingly understood to be the deciding factor for presidential candidates in primary elections. EMILY's List, the feminist political action committee, released figures after the multi-state primary election called "Super Tuesday" in early February 2008, showing that women had turned out in far greater numbers than men to vote.⁸ As a constituency, women were mobilized to act politically. The moment was truly historic in terms of the amount and intensity of women's political participation and what it would eventually mean in terms of outcome.

The present research asks whether the news media did their job in covering women's relationship to the economy in the primary season of 2008. Besides alerting a nation to a serious gender crisis, such information might have informed and influenced women's political behavior at the polls. As one woman said, "'For me, the economy is the No. 1 issue' . . . 'The candidate who comes up with the best plan to help women who are struggling financially will get my vote.'"⁹

⁶ Press Release, Women's Voices, Women Vote, Unmarried Women Hardest Hit by Pay Inequity (Apr. 22, 2008), <http://www.wvov.org/2008/4/22/unmarried-women-hardest-hit-by-pay-inequity>.

⁷ Allison Stevens, *Single Moms' Poverty Spikes after Welfare Overhaul*, WOMEN'S ENEWS, July 3, 2008, <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3658>.

⁸ See Allison Stevens, *Female Democrats Dominate Primary Voting*, WOMEN'S ENEWS, Feb. 7, 2008, <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3486> [hereinafter Stevens II] ("Women heavily dominated the turnout in every state, accounting for between 55 percent and 62 percent of the electorate, according to a gender analysis by EMILY's List, the Washington, D.C.-based political action committee that backs pro-choice female democrats.").

⁹ Johnson, *supra* note 1 (quoting Valerie Reeder, "a 52-year-old single mother, who recently lost her job as a loan clerk").

The study presented here focused on the nation's major agenda-setting news organizations. We sought specifically to learn whether the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* had responded to women's stated concerns about the economy by providing gendered angles and women's perspectives in their reporting. The study proceeded from the assumption that a socially responsible news media, in this particular primary election season, would be one that helped women to better understand the economy as it specifically related to their location in it. To aid us in our work, we posed and applied what we call a *feminist theory of social responsibility* in the research, which examined economic news in the *Times* and *Post* for the months of the primary season, i.e., January through June 2008. We were concerned not only with the amount of coverage of women and the economy during these months, but also with whether or not that coverage placed gender central to the reporting. In other words, did the individual news story, feature story, or opinion piece make specific connections between the economy and women's lives? This primarily qualitative research also asked whether women were allowed to speak in these stories (i.e., whether they were used as sources), and it considered what they said. Thus, the variables examined in the study were *amount of coverage*, *kind of coverage*, *gender perspective*, and *women's voice*.

I. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Research since the 1970s has shown that the news routinely missed the opportunity to provide gender angles in coverage of the economy, government and politics. Most recently, Margaret Gallagher, reporting for the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), found that “[a]n enormous amount of news makes women and women’s experience invisible simply by neglecting female viewpoints, or by failing to consider different implications of an issue for women and men.”¹⁰ GMMP data for the United States showed that women were the subjects of news about the economy in only 28% of print and broadcast news, 21% of stories about politics, and 23% of stories about health or science.¹¹ Within the United States, women typically make up 54% of the electorate,¹² but that figure had already risen by the 2008 primary season, which saw women comprising as many as

¹⁰ MARGARET GALLAGHER, WHO MAKES THE NEWS?, GLOBAL MEDIA MONITORING PROJECT 2005 95 (2005).

¹¹ *Id.* at 124-25.

¹² Lake & Price, *supra* note 2, at 39.

60% of the voters in some states.¹³ The presidential candidates understood they could not be elected without the women's vote.

As the so-called fourth estate, the news has long served as the crucial link between government and people in democratic societies, according to mass communication theory.¹⁴ The news alerts citizens to problems and offers informed analysis as a basis for political participation. News has also been the celebrated watchdog of government, informing citizens how their leaders and institutions are performing. Even so, the news has traditionally done less to serve women's needs.¹⁵

According to Mira Sotirovic, women's access to news and information that might better inform their political participation remains elusive. She notes that "[m]odern day political scientists consistently find that women do not perform as well as men on the standard test of political competence to participate in a representative democracy – political knowledge."¹⁶ Political knowledge refers to the spectrum of information needed to enable citizens to cast votes and express their views on important public issues, as well as engage in other politically-oriented civic activity. The news media have not performed well in their longstanding role to promote democratic competence through their reporting. Although both men and women are mobilized by following news about national and local events by reading a newspaper, most content makes "poor connections between issues belonging to typically female domains" and is "unlikely to empower" those who use that reporting.¹⁷ Daily newspapers, she said, "seem to be the least responsive to needs of women age 24 to 30."¹⁸

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theory specifically grounded in women's relationship to social institutions for use in examining, explaining and positing solutions to the news's inattention to women is long overdue. Carolyn Byerly and Karen Ross note that feminist theory building in communication has typically developed along two lines. The first is to adapt or extend an existing

¹³ See Stevens II, *supra* note 9.

¹⁴ See DENIS MCQUAIL, MCQUAIL'S MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY (4th ed.) (2000) (demonstrating how theories of mass communication relate to the understanding of society and culture).

¹⁵ MIRA SOTIROVIC, GENDER DIFFERENCES IN NEWS MEDIA USE AND THEIR POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS 15 (2008) ("Typically, news presents politics as a competitive game and focus on procedures, strategies and tactics, perhaps not the aspect of the politics that appeals to women.").

¹⁶ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 9.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 11.

theory to incorporate women's experience. The second is to pose a new theory to explain a problem or phenomenon specific to women's communicative lives.¹⁹ We suggest the usefulness here of taking the first approach, extending the existing theory of a socially responsible press that both social science and critical scholars have long looked to when evaluating the performance of news media in democratic society. That theory emerged in 1947 from the work of a private commission headed by Chicago University Chancellor Robert Hutchins. Composed of journalists, scholars and others, the Hutchins Commission's task was to consider a range of questions regarding the role and status of the press in the United States. Among these questions were whether the press (i.e., the news media) was succeeding or failing and whether it was truly open to free expression. One of the Hutchins Commission's enduring legacies to American political thought and journalism history is the collection of principles, or tenets, they posed for a theory of a socially responsible press. According to Denis McQuail, this normative theory states that a socially responsible press is one that adheres to a set of journalistic standards that includes providing a "full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning."²⁰ The theory also states that a socially responsible press should provide a "representative picture of constituent groups in society."²¹ The last of these basic tenets – the requirement for a representative picture of constituent groups in society – contains the mandate for journalists to pay attention to diversity in the news audience. Without specifically spelling out the elements of diversity (e.g., gender, race, age, etc.), we may in fact read these into the theory.

Feminist journalism scholars have not typically looked to this social responsibility theory when evaluating press accountability and performance with respect to women and news. Instead, they have looked to theory addressing women's broader relationship to social institutions. For example, in her research on gender equity in news organizations in Canada, the U.S., and Europe, Gertrude Robinson adopted what she calls "a gender theory of women and news," which recognizes that "gender and identity are socially constructed . . . [and that] makes female experience a central focus of attention and creates new categories for codifying this

¹⁹ CAROLYN M. BYERLY & KAREN ROSS, *WOMEN AND MEDIA: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION* 102 (2006).

²⁰ MCQUAIL, *supra* note 14, at 149 (quoting *The Commission on Freedom of the Press: A Free and Responsible Press* (1947)).

²¹ *Id.* (quoting *The Commission on Freedom of the Press: A Free and Responsible Press* (1947)).

experience.”²² Robinson was drawing on numerous feminist theorists to fashion an eclectic general theory.²³ However, Robinson’s theory lacks either a distinct name (by which to remember it), or a clearly stated set of principles and tenets to provide normative standards by which to judge the news media’s responsibility in certain instances of reporting, or in other behavior regarding women (in the case of her study, that of employing women).

Without fully developing its potential for feminist theory, feminist political scientist Pippa Norris puts the social responsibility theory forward as the one best suited for determining whether news media perform up to their own standards for pluralism in viewpoints, voices, and subject matter. She falls short, however, of incorporating a specific gender dimension.²⁴

The task at hand, therefore, is to join together the strands of traditional social responsibility theory with concerns posited by feminists who share similar goals of having a normative theory for a press system that is accountable to its constituencies, with respect to gender. We thus pose the *feminist theory of social responsibility*, which would, in our view, define social responsibility, with respect to gender, as being a news organization that:

Provides coverage of issues and events that affect women’s status and well-being;

Includes a range of women’s views and experientially-based statements in such coverage;

Offers a forum for an exchange, comment and criticism on gender-related issues;

Includes equal gender representation in all levels of professional practice, governance, and ownership.

We next apply the feminist theory of social responsibility in evaluating the performance of the nation’s two major agenda-setting newspapers, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, with regard to their coverage of economic issues, as these relate to women’s situation, during the primary election season, January to June 2008.

²² GERTRUDE JOCH ROBINSON, *GENDER, JOURNALISM AND EQUITY: CANADIAN, U.S. AND EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES* 6 (2005).

²³ See, e.g., LIESBET VAN ZONEN, *ENTERTAINING THE CITIZEN: WHEN POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE CONVERGE* (2004) (encouraging readers to think about how the link between entertainment and politics has the potential to rejuvenate citizenship).

²⁴ PIPPA NORRIS, *WOMEN, MEDIA, AND POLITICS* 1 (1997) (“The most widely accepted account of journalistic principles . . . is provided by social responsibility theory.”).

III. METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes frequencies from content analysis, supplemented by a qualitative textual analysis, to determine whether (and to what extent) the individual news story, feature story or opinion piece made specific connections between the economy and women's lives. The study also asks whether women were allowed to speak in these stories (i.e., whether they were used as sources). Thus, the three variables examined in the study were *amount of coverage*, *gender perspective*, and *women's voice*.

Sample selection. Using the keyword combination "United States AND women AND economy," we searched the Lexis-Nexis database for news and commentaries published between January 1 and June 30, 2008, in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. This period of time covers the months of the election year "primary season" when voters selected the front runners for president of the United States through primary elections and neighborhood caucuses (a system still used in some states). The search identified approximately 200 stories from the *New York Times* and 150 stories from the *Washington Post*. From these, we identified a smaller sample of 14 and 11 items respectively – a total of 25 stories and commentaries – using the criterion of whether an article provided greater attention to women and the economy than just a passing mention of women (i.e., one or two words). We subjected this sample of 25 articles to both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Procedures. Stories were coded for length (i.e., number of words), topic, format (i.e., news or commentary), gender (i.e., women's) perspective and women's voice. Women's perspective was determined to be either the "main focus" (i.e., introduced as such and forming the main direction of the article) or "one aspect" (i.e., forming only one element of several things considered in the article). The strength of women's voice was determined by the number of women quoted or referred to in the article, and the amount of space allotted to them. We also considered what women had said (with respect to the economy) in these articles, which reveals the ways in which the journalistic routines of reporting and editing treated gender.

IV. FINDINGS

In interpretive research (which uses qualitative methodology), the main goal is to arrive at a deeper level of understanding of the phenomenon than

might be accomplished through common-sense assessments.²⁵ Such findings are specific to the particular things being examined (in this case, the texts of 25 stories from two leading newspapers), and cannot be generalized (i.e., all news of the economy, as it related to women, during primary season). Where we offer numerical information, it is only to demonstrate the strength of one thing or another in our particular sample, rather than to suggest a statistical level of significance. While qualitative findings may not be generalized, we emphasize that neither should they be dismissed. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are leaders in the news business, both at home and abroad, in what they determine to be the most important news of the day. In addition, both newspapers have significant audiences of their own, which include opinion leaders, elected leaders, and a wide range of others. Therefore, the findings from the research offer useful insights into how these important print media performed during a historical period when women's relationship to the United States economy was in peril.

Format and placement. There were three times as many news stories (hard news and feature) as commentaries – 19 to 6 – in the sample. The average length of a news story was 1,166 words, and the average length of a commentary was 815.

Table 1: Journalistic format

<u>Format</u>	<u>Number</u>
News	19
<u>Commentary</u>	<u>6</u>
Totals	25

Two-thirds of the articles we examined were published in the A-section (i.e., the first section of the paper), with half of those stories on that section's front page. Thus, for the small number of stories in which women and the economy were reported on during primary season 2008, the nation's two leading newspapers placed these items in the section considered to contain the most important news. We note that some of the stories published in other sections (e.g., business and finance) similarly appeared on those sections' front pages. Thus, while the total number of stories about women and the economy was low, the prominence afforded them was high.

²⁵ See KATHERINE MILLER, *COMMUNICATION THEORIES: PERSPECTIVES, PROCESSES, AND CONTEXTS* (2d ed. 2004).

Table 2: Prominence

<u>Page</u>	<u>Number</u>
A1	7
Other pages in A section	7
<u>Other parts of paper</u>	<u>11</u>
Totals	25

Gender perspective. Only about a third (8) of the 25 articles we examined made women the *main focus* of the story. Those that put women and the economy central to the story's theme and development may be said to contain a *strong perspective on women*. In contrast, those that considered women and the economy as only one aspect of a longer story (which may have had a different topic altogether, e.g., campaign strategies) may be said to contain a *weak perspective on women*.

The small number of stories concerned with women and the economy in the two newspapers generally demonstrates women's marginalization in the most serious news of the day. This occurred in a year when women themselves had said that the economy mattered the most to them, when women's economic status was losing ground and when they were able to act on that concern in the primary elections.

Table 3: Gender perspective Stories

<u>Perspective</u>	<u>Number</u>
Women as one aspect	15
<u>Women as main focus</u>	<u>10</u>
Totals	25

Those *Times* and *Post* news stories in which women and the economy did figure centrally offer a model of what might have been done to a greater extent by both papers. One good example was an article that specifically emphasized African-American women's problems in the economy.²⁶ Written by *New York Times* reporter Peter S. Goodman, the article led off with an account of Nicole Flenbaugh, a 36-year-old widow, who had been recently laid off and was working temporary jobs to support herself and her two children.²⁷ Goodman also quoted several other African-

²⁶ See Peter S. Goodman, *Is a Lean Economy Turning Mean?*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 2, 2008, at BU1 ("Now it's getting tougher – particularly for those at the lower rungs of the economic ladder, and especially for African Americans like Ms. Flenbaugh.").

²⁷ See *id.*

American women, who make up the demographic group which has represented a stable 45% of the unemployed since 2000.²⁸ The story, which ran on page 1 of the business section, dedicated a fourth of its 3,100 words to women's quotes, most of those from African Americans. Goodman also looked at diverse industries in the Bay Area to provide examples of women's unemployment.²⁹ The story explored the causes of joblessness, and it let women in a variety of occupations speak about their circumstances and how they had coped.³⁰ Goodman's reporting is exemplary for its scope, detail, and strong gender perspective regarding women's suffering and survival in hard economic times.

By contrast, the larger number of stories that we examined (15) addressed women's economic woes as only one aspect of a larger picture. A number of the articles in this category were essentially "horse race stories" that reported where candidates were in the polls, and, in the process, they managed to say a little something – but not much – about women in the economy. An example of the "one-aspect of many" approach was a story by *Washington Post* writers Jon Cohen and Jennifer Agiesta in early March.³¹ The authors noted that Hillary Clinton, who had adopted the economy as her chief concern early on, was doing particularly well among white, working-class women.³² The story went on to explore a range of factors that were bringing Clinton up in the polls, but it never returned to women and the economy.

Topical patterns in economic stories. Topics related to the economy that were most frequently covered (in order of highest to lowest) in the stories we examined were joblessness (i.e., unemployment), public economic policy, the impact of the economy on women (e.g., difficulty of covering costs), and the ways in which the economy affected the status of the campaigns in the polls.

²⁸ See *id.* ("From 1975 to early 2000, the percentage of African-American women who were employed jumped to 59 percent from 42 percent. Two years later . . . [it] had dropped to 55 percent. Since then, employment among African American women has shown little change, reaching 55.7 percent at the end of 2007.").

²⁹ See *id.* ("Oakland reflects a national trend: The weaker labor market is especially pronounced for African Americans, and black women in particular, a slide that has halted a quarter-century of steady gains.").

³⁰ See *id.* (analyzing "the increasingly anemic job market").

³¹ Jennifer Agiesta & Jon Cohen, *White Working-Class Voters Fuel Clinton's Comeback*, WASH. POST, Mar. 5, 2008, at A09.

³² See *id.* (noting that Clinton "did better among voters who cited the economy as the top issue").

Table 4: Topic

Topic	Number
Joblessness	6
Economic policy	6
Campaigns/polls	5
Impact of economy	4
Other	4
Totals	25

Women's voice. The extent to which women's voices were heard in the articles of either newspaper was relatively low. Over a six-month period in which women's interests – and stakes – in the economy were known to be high, a total of 15 women were quoted in the 14 stories of the *New York Times*, and only 20 women were quoted in the 11 stories of the *Washington Post*. The number of words attributed to women (5,280) in the two newspapers combined represented only about 20% of the total 27,046 words in those articles.

Table 5: Women's Voice

Newspaper	Total words	Women's quotes	%
N.Y. Times	16,641	3,120	19
Wash. Post	10,405	2,160	21
Totals	27,046	5,280	avg = 20

In relation to the issue that women felt was most important in their lives – the economy – their individual voices were muted in the nation's two leading agenda-setting newspapers, even though both papers tended to give relative prominence to the few articles they did run. In regard to the element of voice, the *Times* and *Post* were almost identical. Which women spoke, and what they said, represented an average 20% of the whole article. Their comments are worth a close look, as has been suggested in the examples given throughout this discussion.

A particular strand of feminist and other critical research on news since the 1970s has shown the mainstream news media's preference for elite sources,³³ including elite women (i.e., those of higher social standing or formal status within institutions). The mix of women's voices in the small

³³ See GAYE TUCHMAN, MAKING NEWS: A STUDY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY (1978) (noting that news organizations shape knowledge and ideology); see also Carolyn M. Byerly, The Women's Feature Service and the Making of World News (1990) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington) (on file with author).

sample examined here, therefore, is a departure from this pattern. The format of commentaries – editorials, op-ed columns – is designed for analysis and opinion development, and therefore does not represent reporting, which relies on direct and indirect quotes to establish attribution. It is of little surprise that both the greatest number and range of diversity of voices were found in the hard news and news feature articles; it was news stories, therefore, that demonstrated a strong perspective on women. Particularly commendable, for example was *Times* reporter Katharine Q. Seelye's 1,212-word story about Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's efforts to get the Black women's votes.³⁴ Seelye visited beauty salons, campuses, and factories in Charleston, South Carolina, talking to hairstylists and customers – a total of 50 Black women (11 of whom were used as sources in the story).³⁵ She was able to bring to life the range of thinking that contributed to the ambivalence many African-American women felt over having to choose between a woman and a man of their own race. Said 61-year-old hair stylist Clara Vereen: “‘A man is stronger’ ‘[I]f a war come, a man should tell us what to do.’”³⁶ Retired schoolteacher Patricia Greene Edwards, on the other hand, said she “wished she could combine the best of Mr. Obama and the best of Mrs. Clinton into one package.”³⁷

Another exemplary article providing a role model for using a range of women's voices to create an article with a strong women's perspective was one by the *Post's* Nancy Trejos. Trejos's piece on workers' rights groups emphasized the struggle to prevent widespread changes to the 15-year-old Family and Medical Leave Act.³⁸ Six female sources, including casino workers, a director of policy in a professional organization and an assistant secretary of labor, brought the details of that debate to life in relation to the lives that would be affected by the law. As employers pushed Congress to put limits on a law that they believed helped to excuse absence and tardiness, women like Chante Lasco, a lawyer in Easton, Maryland, wanted even more benefits added so that new mothers like herself would not have to return to work immediately.

A third example came in the *Post's* Alec MacGillis's 907-word article

³⁴ See Katharine Q. Seelye, *In South Carolina, a Bid for Black Women's Votes*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 15, 2008, at A18 (describing the political views among black women before South Carolina's Democratic Primary).

³⁵ See *id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ See Nancy Trejos, *Take Two on Time off: Sweeping Changes Debated for Landmark Family and Medical Leave Act*, WASH. POST, Apr. 24, 2008, at D01.

about Hillary Clinton's re-emergence as a candidate of choice among Democrats.³⁹ Reported from Youngstown, Ohio on primary election day in early March, MacGillis let women explain how they had organized to get the women's vote for Hillary.⁴⁰ Among those he quoted was registered nurse Kathy Zarzycki, who had been out on disability for three years and was among those who were making phone calls to rouse voters to go to the polls.⁴¹ She recounted telling voters, "'We're really struggling here in Ohio – the economy, the cost of gas.' . . . 'Hillary asked me to call you because it's all up to you.'"⁴²

V. DISCUSSION

We are mindful of how the study began in its search for news stories and commentaries that concerned women and the economy during the months of the primary election season. From an initial pool of some 350 stories, we located only 25 (7%) that contained more than a few words or a single phrase about women in two of the U.S.'s agenda-setting newspapers, both of which represent papers of record. This small subset comprising the sample analyzed here thus says much about the little interest the nation's two most prominent newspapers took in women during a political season when women's interests in the economy were documented to be high, and in which their stakes in the outcome of the election were obviously great. We note that even the initial pool of 350 stories seems miniscule given the hundreds of stories about the economy that each newspaper published over the same 6-month period.

This general lack of interest of U.S. agenda-setting newspapers in women's relationship to the economy, as seen in the present study, reflects a larger global trend. The most recent round of the Global Media Monitoring Project found that only 3% of the print and electronic news examined in 76 nations concerned women and the economy.⁴³ Thus, while limited, the present study fits comfortably within the context of a larger empirical literature with similar findings.

One of the limitations of the present study was its consideration of only two newspapers. Admittedly, we know nothing of the nation's other major

³⁹ See Alec MacGillis, *Clinton Reasserts Edge*, WASH. POST, Mar. 5, 2008, at A14 (citing exit polls which showed Clinton "re-asserting her edge with working-class white voters").

⁴⁰ See *id.*

⁴¹ See *id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ See GALLAGHER, *supra* note 10, at 72.

and minor dailies, nor of the electronic news media, with respect to the attention that they paid to women's economic situation in 2008. What we can say with some certainty, though, is that many – perhaps even most – of them followed the lead of the *Times* and *Post* in defining their own coverage. Stories in both papers are circulated and published in other print media, and they are quoted by journalists in the electronic media. Editors of daily newspapers throughout the nation look to the main stories of these two East Coast papers to determine their own story assignments. Therefore, the little amount of attention that either newspaper afforded women and the economy may have served to curtail news about women in the economy among other media within the same time frame. This tendency toward exclusion of news about women and the economy set an unfortunate reporting model on something representing life-and-death concerns for a substantial segment of the population.

The exceptions must also be noted. Within this larger context of journalistic neglect, some reporters identified in the present study did excellent work to bring a strong perspective on women to their stories on the economy, thereby affording a range of women the space and privilege to speak, and providing sufficient background to help news audiences grasp women's economic circumstances and concerns. The foregoing discussion has tried to showcase some of these exemplary stories and their authors as a way of demonstrating a way forward.

How should the nation's two leading newspapers, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, be judged with respect to the tenets of the feminist theory of social responsibility as outlined earlier? The present study indicates that there was a dearth of reporting in the two leading papers on the issue of the economy, as it specifically affects women. Several of the reporters did make exemplary efforts by including a range of women's views and experience-based statements; yet, most of their colleagues did little to nothing to respond to the same opportunity. In these respects, both newspapers fell considerably below even a modest standard for social responsibility with respect to gender. It follows, then, that they did not provide the forum for public exchange on gender-related issues; in fact, they actually shut women's voices out of such participation in their pages with respect to the issue women had stated they cared the most about.

While this particular research did not address the fourth tenet of the theory – equal gender representation in all levels of professional practice, governance and ownership – one might surmise that the lack of such representation in journalistic industries is a strong possible explanation for the under-reporting on serious gender matters, such as women and the

economy. Recent research showed women and minorities' ownership of media in the U.S. as being in the low single digits.⁴⁴ Maurine Beasley also pointed to the lack of women in decision-making ranks within newsrooms as a cause of low attention to issues and events of specific interest to women.⁴⁵ These factors strongly suggest the need for specific future research investigating the effect of women's ownership and decision making power on news content.

⁴⁴ See BYERLY & ROSS, *supra* note 19, at 78 (noting that women make up only 13% of the top executives and only 9% of the individuals on boards of directors in the telecommunications and electronic commerce industries).

⁴⁵ See Maurine H. Beasley, *How Can Media Coverage of Women be Improved?*, in NORRIS, *supra* note 24, at 242 (proposing that the media industry must "continue efforts to hire, retain and promote women . . . so that a variety of voices are brought into the news process").