

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MARJORIE GRIFFIN COHEN and JANE PULKINGHAM (Eds.) *Public Policy for Women: The State, Income Security and Labour Market Issues*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, xi + 395 p., index.

The twenty-two contributors to *Public Policy for Women: The State, Income Security and Labour Market Issues* discuss events affecting the lives of women from a variety of feminist perspectives. The editors' underlying goal of advancing "a progressive agenda for the future" (xi) is important as our lives are so often adversely influenced by inefficient public policies. Although some of their recommendations will not be achieved in the immediate future, their realistic paths for achieving their long-term goal of equality are certainly worth considering.

The first section, *Restructuring Public Policy in the Canadian State*, begins with an overview of neoliberalism, a topic of great concern for all of the authors. Based on a philosophy of individualism and minimal state intervention in society, neoliberalism has moulded Canadian public policy for more than two decades. Wendy McKeen draws attention to this in her critical analysis of the National Children's Agenda and its programming for at-risk populations. While recognizing that such policies "did not represent a straightforward return to the old residual notion of blaming individuals" (79), she nonetheless argues that they continue to conceptualize social problems from health and psychological perspectives rather than a sociological perspective. These policies also embody a rather narrow concept of social justice. Jane Jenson highlights how neoliberalism can threaten progressive policies designed to advance the rights of vulnerable populations. In this case it is the child care policies, advocated by the Parti Québécois government in Québec, which the Liberal Party started to undermine when they formed the provincial government. The Liberals claimed that more child care services should be turned over to the private sector. Jenson concludes her chapter by praising the impact which social movements can have in resisting the government. The backtracking by the Liberal government was limited to some extent by childcare workers, mothers, and fathers.

Sheila M. Neysmith et al. draw attention to the challenges many women face in engaging in the voluntary associations of civil society. Their cross-site research was focused on women in diverse community groups: a network of older feminists, a food cooperative program, an organization offering employability training for women who have escaped abusive relationships, families who live in poor and multicultural neighbourhoods, a tenant group in an urban social housing complex, and a program focusing on young immigrant women. The research question was "What supports and constrains how women and groups provision for themselves and others for whom they have relationships of responsibility?"

(94-95). While the inclusion of a diverse group of women allows different perspectives to be surveyed, it is shown that the actual demands placed on women through their provisioning responsibilities are not very diverse. There is a clear indication of the negative impact provisioning can have on women's opportunities to engage in voluntary associations which otherwise could positively influence their lives.

Olena Hankivsky provides a critique of gender mainstreaming, a policy endorsed by both the Canadian government and the United Nations at the same time that neoliberal policies undermine efforts to promote social justice. She presents "deep evaluation" (originally proposed by Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline) as a potential alternative to the previous ineffective strategies promoting gender equality. Deep evaluation is intended to put "into question the grounding premises of any proposed or existing policies" by reflecting – from the very beginning of the policy development process – on its likely implications (125). There are several aspects which are considered such as how key concepts inadvertently shape the understandings of an issue.

The second section, *Reimagining Income Security for the most Vulnerable*, focuses on lone mothers and the difficulties they face in securing a liveable income. Margot Young's feminist approach to a guaranteed annual income (GAI) uses "the needs and circumstances of lone mothers as context for thinking about basic income" (206) because over a third of households headed by women have incomes below Statistics Canada's after-tax low income cut-offs. Young concludes that GAI should not be a priority of the Canadian government. Instead, the priorities should be a well-developed welfare state which guarantees that human needs are met and that labour market policies protect the most disadvantaged populations. This idea is supported by Penny Gurstein and Silvia Vilches whose study highlights women's reliance on social networks to meet their basic needs. They found that these relationships rely on reciprocity and are often fragile, leading to an increase in women's vulnerability. But they are often unavoidable given the structure of current policies. An "ecological" model is recommended. It should "better address the provisioning services because the sources of support are organized within the totality of a person's environment" (243). This model requires a shift in responsibility, moving away from individual responsibility to a more collective responsibility in order to ensure that families' needs are met. While Gurstein and Vilches recognize that this model may seem unachievable given the current policy context, they contend that it is actually feasible – if the public had a different understanding of the meaning of work and child care responsibilities.

Lee Lakeman has written a thought-provoking discussion of prostitution from the perspective of "feminist abolition theory." As the word "abolition" implies, the goal is to eliminate prostitution. At first glance, this might seem to be a hopelessly utopian project, but she convincingly draws attention to the logical flaws in efforts to reform prostitution through decriminalization and legalization. Advocates of the more modest goal of harm reduction, according to Lakeman, "cannot imagine ending prostitution" (144) because [they] neglect the way prostitution is related to race, class, and gender oppression. Prostitution is not just selling sexual services for money. It is a system of exploitation. "According to

abolitionists, nothing about prostitution makes it inevitable, necessary, or worthwhile” (150). The most effective strategy for eliminating prostitution, which Lakeman supports, is to focus on the underlying economic causes in the lives of marginalized women.

In the final section, Rethinking Labour Market and Employment Support Policy, Canada’s Employment Insurance program (EI) is the common topic of discussion. Since the implementation of EI reform in 1996, changes to special benefits and the increased family supplement have benefited women “only as mothers,” according to Martha MacDonald (264). While maternal and parental benefits are needed, this still does not obscure the fact that all members of society should be able to benefit equally from EI program. Jill Hanley and Eric Shragge’s analysis draws attention to the fact that many workers cannot collect EI benefits because of their immigrant status despite being required to pay into the EI fund. Contributors such as Andrew Jackson, who believe that Employment Insurance is part of the solution to the problems of working-poor women, call for a progressive reform of the program. An obvious first step is to recognize the types of workers who are severely disadvantaged by its current structure.

Family policies can also adversely influence women’s economic security. Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay presents a typology of family policy: the work-family balance model, the work-family alternating model, and the non-interventionist model. The first model is the most progressive of the three and is characteristic of Scandinavian countries. It is designed to allow both men and women opportunities to remain employed while raising a family by offering adequate public childcare services, flexible and paid parental leave, and working-time arrangements accommodating the needs of parents. The second type, the work-family alternating model, is adopted by countries such as Germany and the Netherlands and encourages movement (mainly for women) between the public and private spheres. Precedence is given to raising children. After children reach school age, the employment of mothers (often on a part-time basis) is encouraged. The non-interventionist model involves little or no state intervention to support balancing careers and family responsibilities. This model is typical of the United States and the United Kingdom. Although Canada “is often associated with the United States as representative of a non-interventionist model” (275), Tremblay notes that significant differences can be found between the two countries. Quebec’s policies are used as an example of the work-family balance model, although Quebec has yet to reach the Scandinavian standard.

As a result of the changing structure of the labour market and the inability of current employment policies to meet women’s economic security needs, Leah F. Vosko presents three alternatives for “reimagining labour and social protection in industrialized countries in light of the gendered rise of precarious employment” (374). These include the revival of the standard employment relationship (SER), a flexible SER, and “beyond employment.” The revival of SER involves redefining who is considered an employee by incorporating more self-employed workers (those with limited chances of profits and risks) into the scope of employment policy. The flexible SER has a less definitive prototype. Overall, it advocates recognizing a greater variety of forms of work, reflecting changes in the market for products and services in contemporary societies, while minimizing

the insecurity typical of temporary and part-time jobs. Unlike these two models, advocates of “beyond employment” do not seek to use the employment relationship as a basis for social and labour protection. “Beyond employment” is based on the idea that all members of society should be accorded labour and social protection irrespective of their status in the labour force. The latter two models recognize the current disjuncture between employment policies and the economic security needs of women. Although they offer a promise of meeting the specific needs of women, Vosko cautions that strong state supports are needed. In addition, those who attempt to implement alternative models need to remember that “engaging in continual collective struggles” will be required (391).

Despite the widely-discussed trend of abandoning mandatory retirement in Canada, few scholars have focused attention on its repercussions for the most vulnerable populations. Margaret Menton Manery and Arlene Tigar McLaren draw attention to the significance that the mandatory retirement age of 65 has had on existing pension plans and social policies. They contend that the abolishment of mandatory retirement may serve to negatively impact women because they are often employed in lower-paying and less-secure occupations which are not subject to mandatory retirement. Many of these social policies (in particular public pensions) are based on the idea that workers will exit the workforce at the age of 65. However, if this is no longer the standard, it is probable that other social policies will increase their eligibility age. Manery and McLaren suggest that a royal commission should address the income insecurity faced by many senior citizens.

Recognizing the impact which public discourse can have in shaping the experiences of lone mothers, Lea Caragata examines these discursive constructs to gain an understanding of how they provoke feelings of exclusion. Relevant discourses include the deserving and undeserving poor, the citizen as taxpayer, welfare scammers, and wealth as worth. Caragata shows that these common discourses legitimize the exclusion of lone mothers as well as justify ineffective policies which further exclude recipients. Shauna Butterwick addresses the question of how the transition of lone mothers from welfare to work is best supported through a review of evaluations of reforms which have been attempted in four different countries: Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. She criticizes welfare policy for the way long mothers are normally treated as an undifferentiated social group, “ignoring how they may be more or less skilled, more or less educated, younger or older, with or without limiting disabilities, members of a racialized minority...” (186).

This volume lends itself to a range of academic disciplines because of its varied subject matter and methodologies. The issues presented can be used to generate new research ideas, as a basis for academic discussion, and as a point of reference for examples of both successful and unsuccessful public policies. Researchers interested in feminism, gender inequality, work and occupations, policy and governance – and indeed anyone trying to develop a personal philosophy of social justice – will benefit from reading this text.

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