

Book Review: Women and the Canadian Welfare State: Challenges and Change, By Patricia M. Evans and Gerda R. Wekerle (eds)

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BOOK REVIEW

Women and the Canadian Welfare State: Challenges and Change

EDITED BY PATRICIA M. EVANS AND GERDA R. WEKERLE

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997)¹ xii + 329 pages, 9 tables

Feminist scholars have rightly pointed out that even the best of the traditional welfare state literature is limited by a too narrow notion of, and focus on, class. They have insisted that it is crucial to understand how welfare states are gendered. While they acknowledge that inequality declined with the rise of the welfare state and Keynesian economic policy after World War II in western industrialized states, they also stress that social citizenship has meant different, and typically unequal, things for men and women.²

The collection of essays edited by Patricia Evans and Gerda Wekerle, *Women and the Canadian Welfare State: Challenges and Change*, makes a substantial contribution to an emerging feminist literature on the welfare state by examining its Canadian manifestation. Drawing upon feminist literature that seeks to gender the analysis of welfare states, the collection focuses on how the welfare state in Canada created a specific form of citizenship and a limited notion of social rights that simultaneously entrenched and reinforced a sexual division of labour in which women were subordinate to men. It also provides a significant corrective to the general Canadian welfare state literature that has tended either to reduce gender to women or to ignore women completely. As Evans and Wekerle rightly note in their introductory essay, the mainstream scholarship on the welfare state

has focused on state-market relations, but paid little attention to the family, stressing the significance of class, but neglecting gender. It emphasizes the role of the state in regulating market work through levels of welfare and unemployment benefits, but ignores the regulation of women's paid work through, for example, child care policy. An emphasis on class, and class with a male cast, also pays particular attention to the

¹ [hereinafter *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*].

² See J. Lewis, "Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes" in J.S. O'Connor & G.M. Olsen, eds., *Power Resources Theory and the Welfare State: A Critical Approach: Essays Collected in Honour of Walter Korpi* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 229; J.S. O'Connor, "Gender, Class and Citizenship in the Comparative Analysis of Welfare State Regimes: Theoretical and Methodological Issues" (1993) 44 *Brit. J. Soc.* 501; and A. Orloff, "Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship: The Comparative Analysis of Gender Relations and Welfare" (1993) 58 *Am. Soc. Rev.* 303.

important role played by political parties and the labour union movement in social change, but ignores the activity of women in early reform movements who generated and shaped policies through their own organizations.³

This collection sets out to remedy this narrowness in focus to better understand the rise and demise of the Canadian welfare state. But rather than simply substituting gender for class, the contributors embark upon a more onerous task. Although the editors acknowledge that they have not met the theoretical challenge of “attempting to integrate race, class, and gender into a welfare state framework,” they describe the task they set themselves as the “more modest” one of “highlight[ing] the significance of gender, while recognizing the critical ways that class and race intersect.”⁴ Together, the essays fulfill their task. Patricia Daenzer’s article⁵ serves as a particular reminder that it is crucially important to emphasize race in analyzing the Canadian welfare state. It not only shows how race influences the ways in which political interests and strategies are conceived and contested, it traces how separatist political strategies have deep roots in Black people’s struggle in Canada for emancipation. Daenzer’s contribution also makes it clear that state-delivered goods and services have not met the distinctive needs of Black women and their children in Canada.

In their introduction, Evans and Wekerle identify five reasons for their focus on women and the welfare state: (1) policies, services, and benefits in the Canadian welfare state rest on particular gendered assumptions; (2) the Canadian welfare state is an important, though decreasing, source of employment for women; (3) women are the chief consumers of welfare state goods and policies; (4) the social policies of welfare states shape gender relations; and (5) the welfare state has the potential to generate political resources for women.⁶

These reasons for focusing on women, in turn, shape the four main themes of the collection: the role of the Canadian state in restructuring; gender as a dimension, along with class and race, of inequality; the contradictory relationship of women to the welfare state; and women’s political mobilization in relation to the welfare state.⁷

³ P.M. Evans & G.R. Wekerle, “The Shifting Terrain of Women’s Welfare: Theory, Discourse, and Activism” in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 3 at 8-9.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 9.

⁵ P.M. Daenzer, “Challenging Diversity: Black Women and Social Welfare” in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 269.

⁶ See Evans & Wekerle, *supra* note 3 at 4-5.

⁷ *Ibid.* at 5.

These themes are woven throughout the thirteen articles included in the collection. Over one-half are new, and several others have been substantially revised and updated since first publication. Not only do the articles cover a breadth of topics crucial to public policy in Canada, including migration, housing, and long-term care, they span a number of different levels of analysis, from Daenzer's micro examination of the participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken by Black women who were sole support mothers⁸ to Marjorie Griffin Cohen's macro analysis of globalization and the federal government's fiscal policies.⁹ While most of the articles focus on state policies and how they both impact upon women and respond to women's demands, Meg Luxton and Ester Reiter's chapter highlights the role of the state as an employer,¹⁰ and Norene Pupo's chapter examines the relations between women, unions, and the state.¹¹

Several articles in the collection have a specifically legal focus. Mary Jane Mossman and Morag MacLean¹² rethink equality in the face of a gendered analysis of family law and social service provision. In particular, they concentrate on the relative strengths and weaknesses of identifying families as the paradigm legal unit, versus treating individuals as the appropriate unit at law, in order to reconsider equality claims by women. As their chapter points out, "family" is a loose term, and may be too narrow to account for the multiple forms that interdependence takes. Indeed, according to them, "the use of 'the family' as a basic legal unit undermines the goal of equality by selecting which family forms are to be recognized from among a diversity of choices and by reinforcing gendered social roles and responsibilities within this ideal family form."¹³ But, as they also acknowledge, the goal of equality in family law and social assistance may not be served by a replacement with the "individual" as this "may also prevent recognition of the fundamental economic interdependence within families [and] ... the value of home

⁸ See Daenzer, *supra* note 5.

⁹ See M.G. Cohen, "From the Welfare State to Vampire Capitalism" in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 28.

¹⁰ See M. Luxton & E. Reiter, "Double, Double, Toil and Trouble ... Women's Experience of Work and Family in Canada, 1980-1995" in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 197.

¹¹ See N. Pupo, "Women, Unions, and the State: Challenges Ahead" in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 291.

¹² M.J. Mossman & M. MacLean, "Family Law and Social Assistance Programs: Rethinking Equality" in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 117.

¹³ *Ibid.* at 136.

labour may be ignored.”¹⁴ Mossman and MacLean’s chapter offers a sophisticated and subtle approach to legal equality, a major rallying cry of second-wave feminism in Canada, in the context of private and public provision for lone-mother families.

Hester Lessard’s examination of the constitutional entrenchment of social rights as a strategy to advance social justice and, in particular, to redress the material and social inequalities that characterize women’s lives in Canada, also offers a reappraisal of some of the traditional demands and strategies of second-wave feminism.¹⁵ According to Lessard, the problem with entrenching social rights as a demand is that it fails to appreciate the underlying significance of economic restructuring on women’s ability to enjoy social rights, and reinforces the liberal version of the separation between private and public spheres. After examining both the 1992 Social Charter debate, which was part of the Charlottetown Accord constitutional reform process, and access to abortion, after the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the *Criminal Code* restrictions on the performance of abortions, Lessard concludes that one of the fundamental problems with demands for social rights is that “the liberal creation story is being re-enacted by the same actors with just a slightly different script.”¹⁶

Pat Armstrong’s chapter uses the Ontario pay equity legislation to examine both its impact on women’s pay in the province and to assess postmodernist politics’ emphasis on difference, complexity, and the indeterminacy of meaning.¹⁷ And while Sue Findlay focuses on the same legislation, she uses it to illustrate the contradictory results of institutionalizing women’s political demands.¹⁸ Together with other chapters in the book, Findlay shows just how vulnerable feminist political and legal victories are to economic restructuring and political realignment.

Patricia Evans’s chapter¹⁹ also picks up a theme that has been central in feminist engagements with law: whether sameness or

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 137.

¹⁵ See H. Lessard, “Creation Stories: Social Rights and Canada’s Constitution” in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* at 73.

¹⁷ See P. Armstrong, “The State and Pay Equity: Juggling Similarity and Difference, Meaning, and Structures” in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 246.

¹⁸ See S. Findlay, “Institutionalizing Feminist Politics: Learning from the Struggles for Equal Pay in Ontario” in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 310.

¹⁹ See P.M. Evans, “Divided Citizenship? Gender, Income Security, and the Welfare State” in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State*, *supra* note 1, 91.

difference is the better basis on which to establish women's legal entitlements. But, as she makes clear through her examination of different forms of income and their different basis for entitlement, neither maternalist gender-specific provisions nor the current emphasis on formal gender neutrality have served women well. This central dilemma for feminists reflects a fundamental problem for the welfare state. Luxton and Reiter's examination of women's experience of work and family from 1980 to 1995 lead them to conclude that "[t]he welfare state was never able to dissolve the profound contradictions between unpaid and paid work responsibilities of women, nor did legislation or formal policy serve to eliminate discrepancies between male and female workers or even equalize treatment of women workers."²⁰

All of the articles are useful for charting the gendered impact of state policies. Cohen's chapter²¹ also makes a significant contribution by showing how critical it is for feminists to broaden their analytic framework and consider how macro-economic policy is directly related to alternative conceptions of social welfare. The introduction provides a reader-friendly overview of some of the themes that dominate attempts to gender the welfare state. It also succinctly portrays some of the main features of the Canadian welfare state's transformation. This collection makes a valuable contribution to the growing literature that genders public policy analysis in Canada.²²

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²⁰ Luxton & Reiter, *supra* note 10 at 215.

²¹ See Cohen, *supra* note 9.

²² These include I. Bakker, ed., *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); S. Boyd, ed., *Challenging the Public/Private Divide: Feminism, Law, and Public Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); J.M. Brodie, *Politics on the Margins: Restructuring and the Canadian Women's Movement* (Halifax: Fernwood, 1995); and J.M. Brodie, "Canadian Women, Changing State Forms, and Public Policy" in J.M. Brodie, ed., *Women and Canadian Public Policy* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996) 1.

