

A new book refocuses attention on the gendered nature of social relations and social policy, and provides compelling evidence that differences in the experience of women and men are real, sustained and significant – despite being out of policy view.



Gender and social policy

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Engendering Social Policy,
Sophie Watson and
Lesley Doyal (eds)
Open University Press,
Buckingham, UK,
1999, 222 pp.

It is no doubt an irony that at a time in which family, children and the negotiation of public and private rights and responsibilities are dominating social policy, those who have been among the most vocal in putting these issues on the agenda have dropped out of policy view. The Women's Movement of the 1970s and earlier, and feminist writers and academics since, have been instrumental in unmasking and unpacking the gendered nature of social relations and structures, gendered assumptions behind social policies, and the foreseen and unforeseen consequences of these policies for women in particular, but also for children, men and families.

Gendered policy analyses are notably absent from public debate at a time of significant social change comprising globalisation, labour market and welfare restructuring, and a reassertion that 'traditional' families are the cornerstone of society. The invisibility of gender is evidenced in Australia, for example, in the federal government's recent statement 'The future of welfare in the 21st century' which, despite its comprehensiveness, fails to make explicit the gendered assumptions underpinning the policy directions it proposes, nor their likely implications in gender terms.

In the United Kingdom, gender is similarly absent from the public face of social policy. In this climate *Engendering Social Policy* refocuses attention on the gendered nature of social relations and policy. As described by the editors, the book is published at 'a strange and depressing moment for those committed to progressive notions of welfare, and arguably feminism'. In this instance reference is made to the reduction made by Blair's New Labour government to the single parents' benefit in an effort to encourage single parents (90 per cent of whom are women) 'back to work'. This is but one example the book presents of policies which have profoundly gendered effects.

The book brings together the work of a group of feminist scholars at the School of Policy Studies at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom. It is edited by Sophie Watson (Professor of Urban Cultures at the University of East London, formerly of the University of Bristol) and Leslie Doyal (Professor in Health and Social Care at the University of Bristol). Many of the contributors, including the editors, have a long history of working in feminist organisations and acting as policy advisers to various levels of government. Combined, they bring together a diversity of approaches to understanding the gendered nature of social relations and policy.

Engendering Social Policy contributes to policy analysis at two levels, with chapters in the collection presenting both a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives as well as engaging with a broad range of policy debates.

The *theoretical and methodological approaches* to key contemporary policy issues are usefully outlined by Sophie Watson in the introduction. These include: analysis of the production and reinforcement of traditional gendered patterns of work, domestic labour and caring; the representation of gender; the restructuring of domestic gender roles; the equality/difference debate; and analysis of the social construction of gender as a challenge to the sex/gender distinction.

The book's structure does not seek to promote one feminist account nor style of gendered analysis over another. Rather, the diverse collection of chapters acts

as a smorgasbord of stand-alone pieces. There are nevertheless considerable points of commonality throughout the text, in which an approach taken in one chapter informs understanding in another.

Importantly, *Engendering Social Policy* accommodates classic 1970s-style feminist analyses of social policies based in Marxism and structuralism as well as postmodern accounts of gender and gendered policy which have come to the fore in the 1990s. It is these poststructural or post-modern frameworks that embrace diversity and lead ultimately to a focus upon gender rather than feminism alone. The introduction to the book provides an historical account of the shifting face of feminism and an interesting and open account of the contemporary reconstruction of feminist theory in relation to changing social structures and relations and its implications for social policy.

In her own chapter, Sophie Watson demonstrates the implications of this shift in policy terms. In her analysis of the gendered nature of urban space and the built environment, Watson reflects upon the ways in which these questions were addressed by her and others in Marxist frameworks, and how they are understood in postmodern terms today.

Those authors who provide postmodern accounts of gendered policy also provide some clues for policy makers. In a world in which individualisation and risk are increasingly recognised as a fact of contemporary life, the very act of social planning becomes uncertain. A couple of the chapters contained in the book present answers to questions such as 'what is postmodern policy?' and 'how is it made?'.

The *policy debates* addressed in the book show gender to be important across a broad spectrum of policy areas, including: family policy and change; caring; patterns of work; public health; mental health and community care; city planning and service delivery; rural communities; child protection and domestic violence; crime, criminality and poverty; fatherhood; and equality and equal opportunity.

In her chapter 'The changing worlds of work and families', Hilary Land provides a thought provoking account of the shifting emphases of social policy over the past few decades, and its role in manipulating the changing balances between public and private responsibilities. Land weaves into this account changing household and family forms and relations, and the changing world of work, to comment on the construction and reinforcement of female dependency and poverty.

Land's account provides a backdrop against which other policy analyses presented in the book may be understood. Analysis of 'The criminalisation of female poverty', presented by Christina Pantazis, for example, is set in the context of the changing composition and visibility of female poverty. Pantazis argues that female poverty accounts for recent increases in female crime, as opposed to explanations which see women's equality and increased opportunity as responsible for women being more likely to adopt criminal activities which have traditionally been the domain of men.

Other texts in the collection provide a wake-up call to those who would treat families as harmonious and homogenous in which all members are safe and equal. They provide a warning against the assumption that

social policy will impact upon family life in uniform ways. One of the most graphic illustrations is found in Gill Hague's chapter on domestic violence, summarised in the following quote: 'Domestic violence presents a contradiction to policies bolstering the traditional family. Such policies can conflict with government desires . . . to be seen to be both strongly opposed to violence and abuse, and protective of abused women and children.'

Other chapters comment on the shifting policy emphases regarding public and family responsibilities; the changing structure of families; the public and private protection of children; and the experience of family carers.

Given the evolution of feminism and gender studies, it is not surprising that the book provides more analysis of the lives of women and social policy than of men's experiences. Despite this, three of the particularly rich and informative chapters in the collection discuss specific policy concerns for men.

Leslie Doyal presents an analysis of the biological and social forces shaping health, illness and medical treatment, finding that gender affects the health and longevity of men as well as women, in distinct ways. Imogen Taylor examines the caring experiences of women and men, uncovering important differences in the service use, support networks and help seeking behaviours of male and female carers. Sarah Payne presents a sophisticated analysis exposing the role of media and policy in the construction of mental illness among young men as 'dangerous and different'.

The book focuses upon the social policies of the United Kingdom, which provides Australian readers the opportunity for international comparisons – of particular relevance at a time when trends in Australian policy appear in many ways to imitate those of Britain and the United States.

However, the book's main value is its presentation of a range of theoretical and methodological tools for understanding the gendered nature of a range of policies. It acts as a guide to the use of these theories and methodologies in policy analysis, and it presents compelling evidence of the ongoing importance of gender analysis. The book does not attempt to account for *why* gender is absent from current policy debates, yet effectively demonstrates that it is no less important to our understanding of social relations and structures today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s.

Engendering Social Policy is an important contribution to policy analysis and debate, and is recommended to students, researchers, policy makers and analysts who have an interest in understanding the role of gender in social structures, relations and policies. Particular chapters will interest those in the fields of welfare reform, service provision, family policy, health, criminology, child protection and equal opportunity. The book is recommended to all those keen to embrace a range of theoretical and methodological tools in their own understandings of social policy.

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