
This book is a timely update on a wide variety of policies which women activists have worked for since the 1970s. In Australia in the 1970s and 1980s feminists worked to change policies on child care, industrial relations, women’s health, violence against women and so on. A number of books published in the 1980s discussed these issues, but little has been published in recent years. In the face of reduced public expenditure in many areas, privatisation of many government services and changes in the labour force such as an increase in temporary employment, a review of what has happened in the
1990s was needed.

This book emerged from the Women’s Audit Symposium held at the Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne, in 1998. It addresses many of the changes which have occurred and brings together contemporary feminist analyses of the impact of the changing state on women’s policy interests. Hancock notes in her introductory chapter, “Women’s policy interests in the market state,” that the book “seeks to stem the tide of loss, erosion and backlash that threatens to undermine women’s partial and hard-won ‘gains’” (3) of the 1970s and 1980s which she characterises as producing “women-friendly reforms.” The book is important in that it reminds us (concisely) of the changes of the 1970s and 1980s, decades which can be seen as extremely important for the breadth of development of policies important to women in their paid work and private lives. The chapters detail the changes of the next decade, the 1990s. The book “sits within an overarching interest in social justice and the role of the State and public sector, in setting a context for active and inclusive citizenship” (14).

The first four chapters comprise a section “Feminism, the Neoliberal State and Change” and have chapters by the late Clare Burton on “Merit, Gender and Corporate Governance;” Marian Sawer on women and the Australian state; and Carol Bacchi on feminism, theory and policy. In the face of increased privatisation of public sector services, Burton asserts that some of the rules and procedures which protected individual rights within the public sector need to be introduced into the private sector. Sawer reminds us that women have been policy shapers, holding a position of influence in the 1970s and 1980s when more gender equitable outcomes were achieved in government policies. However, the resurgence of market liberalism and the rhetoric of the “family” have brought changes. Her chapter details the changes in the structures for gender accountability within the federal government. Bacchi assesses the removal of specific policy instruments which targeted women and a reduction in services that affect women and analyses the implications of these developments for feminist strategy and theory. She makes the point that the way in which the problem is represented in particular policy debates shapes the type of solution and gives examples from the areas of affirmative action and violence against women.

The remainder of the volume contains 13 chapters that address specific policy areas: family policy by Deborah Mitchell; child care by Deborah Brennan; industrial relations by Bernadine Van Gramberg; equal opportunity by Fay Marles; access to law by Jocelynne Scutt; indigenous women and relations with the state by Terri Libesman, Sonia Pearce and Rhonda Kelly; violence against women by Lee FitzRoy; schools by Jill Blackmore; universities by Jane Kenway and Diana Langmead; women’s health by Gwen Gray; impact of economic restructuring on women and families by Michael Pusey; community auditing government by Carolyn Atkins and Jean McCaughey; women and New Labour in Britain by Anna Coote. The authors include sev-
eral who have worked outside of universities and who reflect on this experience. Marles, for example, includes instances from her work as Equal Opportunity Commissioner in Victoria. Other chapters provide useful overviews of changes and help the reader gain a perspective from which to view contemporary issues. Pusey’s chapter is particularly helpful as he traces the impact of policies based on market forces on families and “middle Australia.”

While all chapters except that by Coote reflect on the Australian experience, the book should interest readers outside Australia who want to analyse the impact of neo-liberal government attitudes on policies which in previous decades could be seen as progressive. For Australian readers, it provides a timely review of what has happened to policies of particular relevance to women in the 1990s. Those who worked for changes in earlier decades might find the book a little depressing in parts (I certainly felt saddened) but it is only by reviewing changes and reflecting on them that new policies can emerge which challenge the current orthodoxy and which can promote social justice.

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