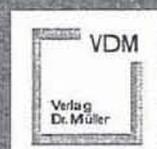


Carole Ford

# Still Invisible: The Myth of the Woman Friendly State

The Impact of State Policy on Women in  
the Past Two Decades





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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Too often the great decisions are originated and given form in bodies made up wholly of men, or so completely dominated by them that whatever of special value women have to offer is shunted aside without expression.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1952: Address to United Nations)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century these words by Eleanor Roosevelt, US government official, writer, humanitarian and wife of a former president, reflect women's position in western democracies almost half a century ago. In the intervening period, there have been numerous advancements for women, not just in the United States, but in Australia also. Australian women had been among the first to gain suffrage at the beginning of the twentieth century, and had embraced what many had hoped was an era of new opportunity. Change was slow, hampered by two global wars, interrupted by a world-wide depression, and constrained by male-dominated institutions, including those responsible for state political and economic policy-making.

In Australia a period of more substantial change [1973 to 1975] resulted from the 'reforming' Labor government, in response to 'an active women's movement', and it was during this period that equal pay was 'granted'<sup>1</sup> and funding for a range of feminist initiated community services was introduced (Curthoys,1994:16). The impetus for change diminished somewhat with a return to a Coalition government in 1975, but by the end of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1985, the then recently elected Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke expressed his government's commitment to a National Agenda for Women (Office of the Status of Women,1989:1). The objectives of the National Agenda for Women, as adopted by the Government in 1988 state:

The Government is committed to ensuring that its policies and programs operate to improve the status of women by providing economic security and independence, freedom from discrimination and equality of opportunity in all spheres of activity. It is committed to ensuring that women's needs are taken fully into account in the development and administration of Government policies and programs.

Office of the Status of Women (1992:1)

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion in Chapter 4 argues the effectiveness of this legislation.

In retrospect, this pronouncement is innately paternal and decidedly liberal, but it contained the promise of advancement for women; a window of opportunity for greater recognition of women as decision-makers and equal participants in the public sphere. Following some positive social change of the 1970s and 1980s, the government was advocating a continued pursuit of issues pertaining to women, through an increasingly woman-friendly state. Opportunistic? Realistic? Feminist? Sustainable? These are some of the viewpoints I sought to research by considering the welfare of women in Victoria in the past two decades. Social policy during this period has been increasingly dominated by 'economic rationalism', and I wanted to test the hypothesis that the economic rationalist state is antipathetic to the promotion of women's welfare.

The documents associated with the National Agenda for Women<sup>2</sup> specifically refer to a diversity of women but, as Segvi Kilic argues, Australian feminist theory and agendas for social change have been dominated by 'Anglo middle-class women' with 'privileged access' to discourse: 'Who is an Australian woman?' Kilic asks (1997:30). It is obvious there is no *woman*, only a diversity of women. In this discussion, I am mindful of the inherent dangers of 'universalising' the experiences, status and lives of Victorian 'women'; similarities and differences may include socio-economic status; age; family structure; sexuality; (dis)ability, religion; as well as cultural and ethnic background, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women. For this reason, I have attempted to focus on issues which impact, albeit differently, on many women, as policies generally are written for, and directed at, women as a gender group. To consider each policy and its impact on specific groups of women would have been beyond the scope of this research, but frequently I found some commonality in many state policies which impacts adversely on *all* women, even if in different ways.

The origins of this research were personal, and arose initially from an 'imagined' post-graduate proposal. In Women's Studies the potential to pursue trans-disciplinary topics encourages the sociological imagination, and provides a challenge to 'render the invisible visible, the silent noisy, the motionless active' (Gordon, 1986:21). In mainstream discussion of economic rationalism (see Chapter 2), description and analysis has been - with only a few exceptions - quite consistently presented under a gender-neutral mantle, by both its supporters

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<sup>2</sup> These documents include National Agenda for Women: Implementation Report (1991 and 1992); A Say, A Choice a Fair Go (1989); and Mid-Term Implementation Report (1990).

and detractors. My concern was not only to develop theoretical understandings from a feminist perspective, but also identify and describe this economic system in a *practical* sense - what does it mean to the lives of women? Additionally, my objective was a wider perception than merely women as paid workers, or students, or carers or any of their other myriad roles - I was interested in the sum total of legislation and state policy and its impact on women, to examine and analyse the interconnectedness of what is frequently presented as discrete facets of state political intervention.

This book is 'living' and 'lived' history. Since I commenced researching in 1997, there has been a change of government at the state level in 1999, and the federal government has been the site for comprehensive change in industrial relations, social security and the taxation system, to name just a few. I have participated in this change as an observer, as well as a player<sup>3</sup>, and frequently the roles overlapped. A crucial task confronting a researcher of contemporary issues is when to actually stop the collection of research data. Even as I write, there are continuing changes - of legislation, of policy, of electoral response - and it is extraordinarily difficult to draw a line across the page and defer any new events for future research.

This research is shaped by feminist perspectives and concerns which is reflected in its structure and organisation: an intermingling of contemporary literature, theorising, critical analysis and examples, presented through a number of inter-related themes. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 explains the origins of the research and how it evolved into a thesis proposal. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the decisions made regarding methodology, and some indication of the basis for direction and shape of this work as it progressed. The contextual understanding of basic concepts and the boundaries of research are also clearly defined.

Contemporary interpretations of welfare and the welfare state are the dominant theme for Chapter 3, and I argue for a broad, comprehensive aspect of 'welfare'. This is not a critique of the social security system, with its connotations of state philanthropy. Rather, it

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<sup>3</sup> This includes active involvement in number of groups, including the Southern Women's Action Network; a Community Audit group; the Association of Women Educators; the Women in the Workplace Network; the Board of Management of the Peninsula Community Health Service; the Mornington Peninsula Shire Economic Development Advisory Group; and the Mornington Peninsula Residents and Ratepayers Association.

pursues issues related to the welfare *of* women, and how this is influenced by a range of state interventionist strategies. A discussion of the economic rationalist/free market state identifies the pervasive influence of language in the debate, particularly as welfare policy is consistently presented as gender-neutral. Feminist theory extends the discourse to reveal the limitations of social policy based on economic models, and questions the validity of crisis theory implemented to justify budgetary constraints. Functional state policy advocates a return to family values and the nuclear family, traditionally the site for women's invisibility in the private sphere of unpaid caring. The impact of family responsibility limits the possibilities for women's economic independence and security under free state structures probably even more substantially than within the welfare state, in a resurgence of right-wing ideology.

The next three chapters move the discussion from a broad consideration of the general topic of welfare to a specific focus on three areas of women's relationship with the state and the state's policy structures: employment, education and health. While women's paid employment is central to the economic status of women, the sexual division of labour so evident in the Australian work place is a structural impediment to their equal participation. Chapter 4 indicates some of the more comprehensive industrial relations legislation of the past two decades, to demonstrate the hidden bias in the actions of the interventionist state. This is illustrated through a number of case studies: the fluctuations in the gender pay gap; the transition towards enterprise bargaining; the implementation of 'flexibility' and how it is interpreted in the workplace; the invisibility of women's unemployment; and the limitations of the male model of superannuation when it is applied to the work force experience of women. In the face of economic restructuring, labour market structures and state decision making reinforce women's marginal status in paid employment.

Just as women are participating in greater numbers in paid employment, their increased presence in all areas of education is undeniable, although their exclusion from the decision making structures persists. Women still exist at the periphery of educational debate, despite their connection to the system as consumers, providers and primary carers. State policy, designed to advance the position of girls and women in education, has proved extremely fragile in the face of crisis theory and economic rationalist discourse. Through the use of a case study approach, Chapter 5 illustrates how effectively policy disengages and

discounts the rights of girls and women in education, and demonstrates how ‘the system’ perpetuates gender disadvantage.

Viewing the reform in the health sector through a similar feminist lens reveals a system which discounts the needs and circumstances of women. As Chapter 6 argues, the reality of health care provision is that it reflects and perpetuates gender relations. Restructuring, based on economic principles, has encouraged a resurgence of policy, defined as gender neutral, but exposed as discriminatory and biased. The health concerns of women are inadequately catered for through the prevailing male medical model, which ignores the centrality of women’s relationships to health services. As with the education system, women are connected to health care as consumers, providers and primary care givers, but are peripheral to the policy making process. The development of case studies in this chapter portrays the state’s complicity in disadvantaging women in their dealings with the system. Specific critical analysis is related to the interventionary practices in childbirth and maternal health and the possible connection between early discharge from hospital after childbirth and post-natal depression; the inadequate, increasingly privatised aged care system; the disempowering impact of the breast cancer ‘industry’; and the strengthening of gendered roles within the health care work force. It examines the use of ‘crisis’ theory to justify the introduction of casemix (hospital) funding and analyses the bias evident in federal intervention in the private health insurance industry. I argue that what links all of these cases is the promotion of supposedly gender-neutral policy and practices which are inherently gendered, to the detriment of women’s well-being.

In reviewing the research in Chapter 7, I repeat the initial question: how effectively can women initiate, promote and accomplish change using the male constructed institutions, including the state? The challenge is to decode and decipher how even women’s ‘problems’ and inequality are both defined by male structures, in their language and on their terms. To rephrase the question from a feminist perspective ‘how does the state contribute to, or ameliorate, the gender disadvantage for women through policy?’ initiates an entirely different response. It also problematises strategies for women that focus on advancing their interests as a social class, through participation in existing patriarchal structures, including political parties and trade unions. In Victoria in 1999 Steve Bracks became premier when he and his Labor Party colleagues defied predictions and gained government in Victoria. Included in his

platform was a substantial redirection of policy to embrace an inclusive ideology, an issue for reflection one year on, with which I conclude this chapter. If women have indeed been the focus of new policy development, how effective and sustainable are any gains that have been made? Or might it still be true, as Eleanor Roosevelt suggested half a century ago (see above), that women are being 'shunted aside'? Is the woman-friendly state still a myth?