

## BOOK REVIEW

### Gender Equality in the Welfare State?

Gillian Pascall

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*Gender Equality in the Welfare State?* was published in the context of a postfeminist choice rhetoric in which it is increasingly assumed that gender equality has been achieved. Going against this grain, Gillian Pascall's book is a potent reminder that change has not infiltrated as far as some commentators claim. Pascall focuses on these issues in the UK policy context, drawing on comparative perspectives from other European Union (EU) countries. One of the main aims of the book is to explore the gender inequalities written into the welfare assumptions and institutions of the UK. Although some gains have been made in certain policy areas, women's access to resources and opportunities remains at a markedly disproportionate level compared to men's; gender disparities linger in employment, wealth, power, care responsibilities, and use of time. Pascall's book was written during a period of economic downturn and at the beginning of austerity politics, a climate which extended throughout the Coalition Government's term in office – and is set to continue through the majority Conservative Government's term – in which fiscal consolidation was made a priority at the expense of social goals. In such a climate, progress towards gender equality is at risk not only of being placed on the backburner but of being halted entirely, or at worst, reversed. There is, then, no doubting the relevance and value of Pascall's timely contribution. Pascall's analysis is exceptionally detailed yet accessible to all audiences with an interest in social policy. The 'further reading and website resources' at the end of each chapter allow the more interested reader to give each topic further consideration. It is, all in all, a valuable guide to gender equality in European welfare systems.

Pascall begins at the very foundations of the welfare state itself; in the makings of the policies of a recovering post-war Britain and in the scripts of the Beveridge Report which normalised and entrenched the constructed gender binaries between the figures of the 'male breadwinner' and the 'female care-giver'. Gender difference, then, was written into the system from its very beginnings. The book is structured around this model of work and family as a lens for exploring how gender is implicated in welfare; how it has changed over time; and how it compares with other welfare states. Pascall

maintains that we are still very much subsumed within a male breadwinner system; that although gender relations may be changing, policy and legislation have not moved at quite the same pace. She proceeds to trace a careful history of government policies and legislation that stand out as key turning points for gender equality in the welfare state, dividing the male breadwinner system into five constituent and inter-related parts. These are covered chapter by chapter: power (voice); work; care; income and; (use of) time, respectively.

*Gendered Power* tackles issues around women's voice and (access to) decision-making powers in the public realm and political sphere, as well as in the private household. Although falling short of pinpointing what she means by 'power', Pascall draws attention to how it manifests itself at different levels and sites: in the household, for instance, while it is most obviously expressed through violence, it also surfaces in decision making about the resources of income and time. In government, women's representation made some gains under New Labour; the proportion of women elected to Westminster as MPs stood at 24 per cent (an increase from five per cent during the elections in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s). This figure decreased to 17 per cent (and four out of 23 cabinet members) under the Conservative/Liberal coalition, but increased again to 29 per cent (and seven out of 22 cabinet members) since the May 2015 election. Despite this slight growth, the composition of Parliament is still far from reflecting the make-up of the electorate (Centre for Women and Democracy, 2015). Cuts made to local authority budgets under the Conservative/Liberal coalition subsequently put voluntary organisations at risk – services which have been crucial in expressing women's voices to government. Drawing comparisons with Nordic countries, Pascall acknowledges that governments which more fully represent women go hand in hand with social policies which better accommodate women's interests and promote gender and social equality. It will be interesting to see if women's interests are in fact represented any more over the next five years given the recent increase in the percentage of women MPs. With regards to representing the diverse spectrum of women and their interests, it matters *who* is standing as well as *how many* (women).

In *Gendered Employment*, Pascall paints a similarly complex picture of gender (in)equality in the labour market. While in the UK, women have seen an expansion in employment over the past few decades (underpinned by a growth in the service sector), they remain overrepresented in part-time and precarious work, as well as in lower-skilled and lower paid jobs. Although most governments now hold to gender equality in principle, the legislation which promotes it is of little use if it is not supported in practice or if it clashes with other policy objectives. The underpinnings of employment policy originate in the Beveridge Report which wrote of women as 'equal to men but different', with 'different missions in life'. The legacy of this duality of roles continues to have an impact, and more recent policies have continually failed to address deep-seated inequalities. Put simply, supporting women's employment to become more like men's is bound to fail if women are still expected to be the primary carers. Pascall importantly takes an intersectional approach to understanding gender inequalities in employment, highlighting the differences between women and men, as well as among women, who are not a homogeneous group. Thus, she considers gender in conjunction with socio-economic differences, ethnicity, disability, and motherhood, arguing that all of these cross-cutting factors affect the link between gender and disadvantage in the labour market. Pascall provides a poignant example of the increasing inequalities between women in the labour market as access increased from the late 1990s. This highlighted the differences of privilege between women, as those with education sustained careers and those less qualified had more fragmented working lives to care for children and/or elderly or disabled relatives. Unfortunately, differences by age are not given due consideration here, which is surprising given that many young women

have poor prospects in part due to discrimination, poor health and caring responsibilities (Escott, 2012).

Closely tied to gender inequality in employment is the issue of *gendered care*, which Pascall considers in the next chapter. Pascall argues that employers and labour market policies assume a gendered division of responsibility in the domestic sphere, so policies to de-gender employment have little effect if nothing is done more broadly to de-gender care. This gender split means that women must fit motherhood and caring for others around employment, and bend their jobs to meet family needs – something which fathers are not expected to do in equal measure. Rather problematically, Pascall places emphasis on motherhood as a penalty, positioning it as more of a constraint rather than a choice, and neglects to mention the rewards it might bring for some in terms of satisfying relationships that make up for any financial and career related setbacks. Understandably, its impact on women's incomes over the life-course is perhaps justifiable reason for the more cynical focus adopted here. This chapter also arguably prioritises care in terms of *childcare* at the expense of caring for elderly or disabled people - an unfortunate omission given the interesting gender dynamics at work in this area. For instance, Carers UK (2014) note that women are far more likely to be carers between the ages of 45-64 years when this may have the most significant impact on their earning power, and reports evidence that working age men who care – although a far smaller group – can face greater workforce disadvantage. So, although women are more likely to provide informal care overall, the picture is not a uniform one. Furthermore, there might be more of an acknowledgement that sharing the costs of caring more fairly is not just about the division of labour between women and men within the household and elsewhere, but about the question of how much the activity and costs of caring – for the household – are supported and valued by governments and society as a whole.

The following chapter focuses on the gap in *income and wealth*; how access to both is structured by gender, and subsequently, how *experiences* of both may be gendered. The chapter looks at the differential poverty risks for women and men, recognising that this goes beyond labour market engagement and rewards, to welfare state services and benefits, to gender inequalities in the family. Pascall draws attention to a study by Hills *et al.* (2010) that shows how the median individual (net) weekly income for women was two-thirds that of men's (£180 for women compared with £281 for men) between 2005/6 to 2007/8. As Pascall has shown in previous chapters, however, this gap is the product of more complex factors, in particular the combination of differences in pay rates and number of hours worked. Resources and income can be distributed unequally within the household too, and gender differences in care make it harder for women to sustain earnings and pension contributions. A gender-equal system requires not only an increase in the minimum wage but for policy-makers, practitioners, and society as a whole to afford greater recognition and valuation of care as labour. The heart of the matter, which Pascall traces in this chapter, is how successive governments have attempted (or neglected) to compensate women for their lower earnings and greater contributions to unpaid care work. Most recent policy trends, explicit in the Conservative/Liberal coalition government's term, have failed to keep pace with societal changes in this respect. Increasing family fluidity, along with changing relationships, requires a shift away from the current system of basing benefits on marriage and partnerships. Universal Credit pays little attention to such details by paying couples' benefits into one account in one single payment, thus riskily placing too much financial power in the hands of one partner. Policies formulated or rolled out since the publication of *Gender Equality in the Welfare State?* extend the austerity agenda further and are likely to increasingly entrench gender inequalities in income. In a written response to the 2015 Budget, the Women's Budget Group (2015) listed a number of measures which are expected to disproportionately impact women

in the coming years, notably raising the Personal Tax Allowance which will solely benefit those who pay income tax (57 per cent of whom are men), and the proposed further £12 billion of cuts to welfare spending to be made over the next two years. Further still, ongoing changes made to the Lone Parents Obligations (LPO) since their introduction in 2008 means that lone parents with a youngest child aged 3 or 4 may be required to attend courses, volunteer, or undertake mandatory work-related activity if they receive Income Support on the basis of being a lone parent, are in receipt of Universal Credit, or are in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group. It has been argued that LPOs disproportionately affect lone mothers and compound their existing labour market disadvantage (Davies, 2012).

Women are also 'time poor' as well as income poor. In her seventh – and personally most thought-provoking – chapter Pascall writes about how the distribution of caring and other family responsibilities impacts women's access to resources over the life course and how this results in 'time poverty'. By time poverty Pascall does not simply mean the length of hours worked, but the time these hours are worked, the intensity of the work done, and how much is left afterwards for 'quality' or leisure time. Time wealth, by inference, is having sufficient and 'quality' non-work time. Pascall shows the extent to which gender divisions in time are rooted in the male breadwinner/female carer model: 'male-style working lives lay behind UK working conditions, lives in which women took responsibility for unpaid work, especially childcare' (p.153). This chapter makes an important contribution; as Pascall states, time and time poverty are much less studied and understood than income and income poverty, and when studied at all, the focus tends to be on middle-class couples working long hours at the top end of the occupational hierarchy. Time poverty is also a particularly pertinent issue in Britain where the longest hours in Europe are worked (Fagan *et al.*, 2001). As argued in *Gendered Care*, unpaid care work tends to fall on women to a greater extent; but while it may be unpaid it is not free. Lone parents suffer more in this respect. Pascall points out that even in the best case scenario (Sweden), lone mothers have 26 hours per week less in terms of leisure time than women in dual-earner households without children. Lone mothers also have to work longer hours to keep themselves and their children out of poverty. Time poverty is equally tied up with class: 'those with lower earnings, lower incomes and more commitments have fewer capabilities to keep themselves and their children out of poverty, whether of time or income' (p.131). Ironically, those with higher incomes can afford time-saving services and equipment, whether professional cleaners or dishwashers, which are typically off-limits for those who need them most. Gendered time poverty, as Pascall argues, will persist in the UK as long as the free market is left to its own devices.

The chapter ends on a more hopeful note by highlighting examples of good practice from other EU countries: in Sweden, for instance, both parents have rights to work reduced hours and are encouraged to take up parental leave while children are young; and the Netherlands uses a 'combination scenario' which enhances the quality and quantity of part-time work so that it might attract more men and encourage them to take equal part in unpaid care work. We can only hope that British policymakers will eventually take heed. *Gender Equality in the Welfare State?* makes a small but crucial step towards this goal.

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