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Economic Restructuring and Gender in Canada: Feminist Policy Initiatives

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Summary. — This paper examines Canadian policy responses to economic and political restructuring over the past decade and the attempts by feminist groups to influence this agenda. It considers the success of these attempts to have gender issues taken up in the macro policy environment and relates feminist policy positions to theoretical themes emerging from the feminist economic literature on macroeconomics and adjustment.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a case study of the engagement of feminist organizations in Canada in recent policy debates surrounding “restructuring” and “adjustment.”¹ It examines the attempts by feminist organizations to influence macro policy in particular. Their efforts parallel those of feminist activists and academics in many other countries. Much has been written concerning the gendered impacts of restructuring and adjustment policies (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1991; Cornia, Jolly and Stewart, 1987). Feminist economists increasingly are emphasizing the gender assumptions underlying economic models and are calling for an explicit recognition of the gendered nature of the economy (Elson, 1991, 1992b; Bakker, 1994). As the papers in this issue emphasize, on a macro level recognition requires analyzing the reproductive sector and its relationship to the monetized economy; challenging the gender neutrality of concepts and measures traditionally used, such as GNP, investment, employment; emphasizing not only differential gender impacts but the feedback effects of those impacts on the traditional macro parameters. It means that the micro foundations of macro theory must incorporate feminist insights about the sexual division of labor, the reproduction of human resources and the intrahousehold allocation of resources and expenditures (Elson, 1991).

This paper shows how feminist organizations in Canada reiterated these points during major policy debates. They were highly visible in the Free Trade debate of 1988 and the Constitutional referendum of 1992. In every jurisdiction they are challenging budget measures which erode services, employment and social security. They have lobbied hard for measure-

ment and recognition of unpaid work. They have continued to fight for a national childcare program, defending the need on macroeconomic as well as social grounds. Women's groups have addressed the restructuring of work by challenging training and immigration policy and by lobbying for employment standards legislation to protect homeworkers, domestics and part-time workers.

While women's groups in many other countries have undertaken related initiatives, significant differences in priorities exist. The Canadian initiatives are typical of feminist concerns in the mature, industrialized economies of Western Europe, North America and Australia, which are facing pressures of restructuring (OECD, 1991). Among these countries Canada represents neither the best nor worst practice in terms of gender-aware policy. Feminist initiatives in developing countries are responding to a different economic context than that in developed countries. Common concerns include access to land, credit and technology for women farmers, improved conditions for women in the informal economy and the destructive impact of structural adjustment policies (Elson, 1992a; Moser, 1993; Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994). While the specific issues and priorities differ, common themes cut across feminist attempts to influence economic policy worldwide: the importance of

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women's contribution to social reproduction and the neglect of that contribution in the macro policy environment, the differences in the labor market experiences of women and men, and the need to challenge main policy areas as well as traditional "women's policy" issues.

Section 2 of this paper summarizes the manifestations of and concerns with restructuring in Canada that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s and introduces the main policy responses. Background is also provided on the structure of the women's movement in Canada. Section 3 examines in more detail, the key economic policy areas of the past decade and the contribution of feminist organizations. The final section summarizes the macroeconomic implications that emerge from the case study and discusses the impact of feminist policy responses.

2. SETTING THE STAGE

(a) *Restructuring in Canada: establishing the discourse*

In Canada, as in other industrialized countries, hindsight places the early manifestations of restructuring in the mid-1970s. Many economic indicators show alterations in trends at that time. For example, the growth rate of GNP slowed, productivity growth began to slow and real incomes began to stagnate. In Canada, on a macro level, the late 1970s were dominated by concern with stagflation and a rising natural rate of unemployment. Labor market analysts drew attention to the changing composition of the workforce, particularly the rapid increase in female labor force participation, and the switch from a goods to a service economy. Technological change became a concern. In Canada, industries such as auto, steel and electronics started to be shaken by increased global competition.

The recession of the early 1980s consolidated concerns about restructuring. Two responses characterized the debate. Some saw the recession as symptomatic of major realignment rather than as a normal business cycle. Job losses were suspected to be permanent, and alarms were sounded. Others viewed the recession as policy-induced rather than part of a "natural" economic shakedown. A monetarist monetary policy focused solely on interest rates was blamed, along with fiscal restraint aimed at halting inflation.

The term restructuring and phrases such as global competition and deindustrialization entered the discussions of micro and macroeconomic policy. Policy documents from this period reveal the emerging concerns.² Recognition of the wide-ranging challenges of restructuring also led the Liberal government in 1982 to organize the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada,

dubbed the Macdonald Commission. The mandate was to examine economic pressures and develop a broad-ranging competitive strategy for the country. The scope included micro and macro issues, ranging from labor market restructuring to international trade. The Macdonald Commission, which held public hearings in 1983 and commissioned academic research, captured the policy debates of the time and marks a watershed in Canadian development and policy. The issues and positions elaborated then continue to be important today. The commission is best remembered for its advocacy of free trade with the United States (Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, 1985a). It reconsidered however, many other issues in light of a changing international economy — the role of the state as employer, the future of social safety nets, federal-provincial division of powers (Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, 1985b).³

Thus, by the mid 1980s, policies framed as a response to restructuring began to be implemented as a way of "adjusting" to changed international conditions. The policies fundamentally altered Canada's orientation to the world market and the role of the state in the economy. By the end of the 1980s, concerns with deficit reduction at all levels of government added new force to the arguments for less government. The main elements of the macro policy in Canada include a monetarist-influenced Bank of Canada policy, pursuit of trade agreements with the United States and Mexico, fiscal constraint and deficit reduction, and privatization and deregulation. Other related policy concerns include labor market adjustment, federal/provincial fiscal arrangements and social security provisions. As we shall see, these relate to macro policy partly as mechanisms of deficit reduction. Another major Canadian policy issue has been constitutional reform over division of powers, which is also related to the pressures of economic restructuring.

(b) *The structure of feminism in Canada: academics, activists and bureaucrats*

The women's movement in Canada, highly visible over the past 25 years, has included academics, grassroots activists and professional women in both the private and public sectors (Findlay, 1987; Burt, 1990; Cart, 1993; Pierson *et al.*, 1993; Adamson, Briskin and McPhail, 1988; Bourne *et al.*, 1993).⁴ The women's movement has a strong involvement with the government, but the relationship is uneasy. The federal government has financially supported many women's groups, most of which are actively trying to alter government policy. While financial dependence creates problems, it also has helped maintain a vibrant

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