Law and Society Association 2004 Annual Meeting – Chicago

"Law and Social Reform Movements" Panel (Chair : William D. Henderson*)*

May 28th, 2004

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**Reshaping Social Rights - The Women's Movement,
State Feminism and Family Policy in Quebec[1]**

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## Abstract

*During the past ten years, social-policy research has increasingly focused on the impact of social policy on women. Indeed, feminist research has reconsidered Esping-Andersen's classic model in order to assess the consequences of the different welfare regimes from women's point of view. In this growing body of research, much more attention has been paid to women as the targets of social policy than to women's agency. However, not only do social rights contribute in shaping gender, but women have also been fighting to reshape social rights according to their interests. I analyze the collective action of women in Quebec in the field of family policy which has been institutionalized as a distinct public-policy domain since the mid eighties. I stress the role of women's policy machinery, expressly the Quebec Council on Woman's Status (CWS), in echoing and formulating a feminist perspective in the field of social rights and family policy. I argue that this feminist intervention implies a transformation of the family-policy frame, from a "family unit" to an "individual" perspective. I then explore the way the CWS manages to define women's interest in the field of family policy, and stress the strategic use of family law in this perspective.*

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The impact of social programs on gender roles and women's autonomy has been a subject of growing attention in social-policy research over the past ten years. Indeed, drawing on the comparative impulse in mainstream research, feminist theory has reconsidered Esping-Andersen's classic model (Esping-Andersen 1990) in order to include an assessment of the consequences of the different welfare regimes from women's point of view. This reconsideration of mainstream comparative research from a gender perspective has led to a shift in focus from the labor market to the interaction between the labor market and the family. Hence, researchers' attention was drawn to family law and family policy, which play an important role in shaping gender, both at the symbolic and at the material level. At a symbolic level, family policy and family law contribute to defining gender roles. In a more substantive way, they can either foster or impede women's autonomy. This body of research has been marked by an ongoing debate over the best grounding for a definition of social rights that will serve women's interests. Given the social norms regarding the sexual division of labor, would women fare better were they allotted social rights based upon the care work they perform in the family, or are employment-based rights the only reliable ones? This debate has deep roots in feminist theory, and can be linked to what Pateman described in 1988 as "the Wollstonecraft dilemma"[2] (Pateman 1988). In the first section of this paper, I will demonstrate that in this growing body of research on gender and the welfare state, much more attention has been paid to women as the targets of social policy than to women's agency. However, not only do social rights contribute to shaping gender, but women have also been fighting to reshape social rights according to their interests. Therefore, an empirical analysis of the strategies developed and the stands taken by women's organizations in the field of family policy provides a welcome complement to theoretical considerations on gender and the welfare state. Moreover, an empirical perspective enables research to escape the normative debate over the proper definition of social rights (Morgan 2001) while at the same time showing how gender interests are defined in a specific historical and social setting through a mobilization and claim-making process. I focus on this claim-making process and the gender identity it constitutes, regardless of the impact of the mobilization on family policy. In the second section of this paper, I argue that Quebec provides a case in point in order to illustrate this interaction between the women's movement and social policy. In order to grasp this interaction, I study an organization that stands at the interface of the women's movement and the Quebec government: the Quebec Council on Woman's Status (CWS). Defining the interest of gender in family policy is a strong challenge for this advisory body, given the

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[2] « The extremely difficult problem faced by women in their attempt to win full citizenship I shall call « Wollstonecraft's dilemma. » The dilemma is that the two routes toward citizenship that women have pursued are mutually incompatible within the confines of the patriarchal welfare state, and, within that context, they are impossible to achieve" (Pateman 1988 p.252) – the first route being the gender-neutral one (which implies the

diversity among women's groups and among women themselves, at a time of accelerated family change. Drawing on an analysis of the advisory reports edited by the CWS in various family policy debates (dealing with family law, day care policy, child support, family allowances and other family-policy issues), I will show in the third section of this paper how the CWS reaches a pragmatic definition of social rights that takes into account women's aspirations and realities, as well as the constraints the Council itself faces as a governmental body.

## Feminist theories of the welfare state: from hegemony to diversity

Feminist scholarship on the welfare state has rapidly evolved in the past ten years. The comparative impulse launched in mainstream research by founding contributions, among them, Esping-Andersen's *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), was followed by feminist research which combined it with a ruthless deconstruction of the gender bias of mainstream research, leading to very interesting developments.

### *The first wave of feminist theory on the state:*
### *A "patriarchal" versus a "women-friendly" welfare state*

Initially, feminist state theory bore a very pessimistic, patriarchal, vision of the state. British Marxist feminists, among them Wilson (1977) and McIntosh (McIntosh 1978, cited by Jenson 1986), were salient authors in this first wave. This Marxist perspective[3] links the sexual division of labor and women's role in the reproduction of the labor force. State intervention is assumed to ensure this assignment of women to the reproduction of the labor force through marriage legislation, a family wage system, and bans on married women's employment. As Jenson (1986) has shown, this theory was strongly embedded in the British context, where state intervention did indeed result in the exclusion of women from the labor force.

Some Scandinavian writers argue to the contrary: that the state could play a more positive role in women's emancipation. Hernes coined the phrase "women-friendly welfare state" to describe this positive effect state programs could have on women (Hernes, 1987). Such a perspective was, in turn, very much influenced by Scandinavian social democratic states (Hernes 1987; Kolberg 1991).

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same social rights as men's, mostly based upon employment), and the second one being gender-specific (Wollstonecraft herself considered social rights based on maternity).

*A new wave of feminist research on the state: attention to variations and diversity*

Beyond this opposition between "patriarchal" and "women-friendly,» the comparative impulse launched by mainstream welfare theory led feminist research to pay more systematic attention to variations (Lewis 1992, O'Connor 1993, Orloff 1993, Sainsbury 1994, 1996). The impact of welfare states on women varies from country to country. Moreover, different aspects of state intervention need to be distinguished. This second-wave of feminist state theory developed through a criticism of Esping-Andersen's work (which was to be labeled as "mainstream" as opposed to gender-aware theories). Esping-Andersen (1990) defines his "welfare regimes" by specifying three dimensions:

1. *The definition of social rights*: social rights are rated according to the degree of their *decommodification* potential, that is to say the degree to which they enable adults to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living without needing to sell their labor force on the labor market;
2. *Social stratification* (different welfare regimes have different stratifying effects).
3. The respective roles played by *the state, the market and the family* in the provision of welfare.

Feminist critics have stressed the major gender-bias underlying the mainstream use of these categories. Indeed, if one puts decommodification at the forefront of welfare evaluation, the implication is that one is speaking from the viewpoint of someone who is already commodified, i.e. selling one's labor force in the market (Orloff 1993, Daly 1994). However, commodification in itself is not taken for granted for most women. Due to the social norms regarding the sexual division of labor, bearing the burden of unpaid care work in the family prevents many women from being able to sell their labor force in the labor market, or from accessing a good position on this market. Therefore, defamilialization[4] might be just as much of an issue as decommodification for most women (Lewis 1997). Moreover, mainstream research usually takes into account only two possible bases of entitlement to social rights, employment and citizenship, whereas a focus on women's relationship to welfare suggests two other bases of entitlement: care and maintenance (Sainsbury 1996). The extent to which care should be promoted as a distinct basis for women's social citizenship has been the subject of ongoing debate in feminist research, which can be linked to what Pateman (1988)

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[3] As described by Jenson (1986) and Orloff (1996)

[4] Here, I choose to refer to the term "defamilialization" as it is commonly used, and as it was appropriated by Esping-Andersen himself (1999), meaning the alleviation of women from the burden of unpaid care work, mainly through a collectivization of this work . Yet it should be noted that the initial feminist definition of

described in 1988 as "the Wollstonecraft dilemma," between a gender-neutral and a gender-specific citizenship, the underlying stake being the definition of "the political interest of gender" (Jones and Jonasdottir 1988). Indeed, feminist theory is marked by endless debate over about what is the proper strategy to be implemented in order to further women's social rights, that is whether women's citizenship should be based on that of men or should have separate grounding based particularly on the recognition of care.

Further, the accepted definition of social stratification usually avoids the issue of gender stratification, within society at large and within the family. Feminist researchers have stressed the issue of gender inequality at a macro-level (showing for example the feminization of poverty) and at the household level (Hobson 1990). The latter acknowledgement led to inquiries into the distribution of resources within the couple (between the two spouses), and the way public policies affect this distribution. We will see, below, that this new focus on the distribution of resources within the couple appeals to a new perspective on family law and tax laws, which plays a decisive role in determining the allocation of resources within the family. Once again, bringing gender into play entails a subversion of institutionally defined research areas.

Finally, feminist research criticizes Esping-Andersen's theory for focusing excessively on the state-market relationship, not really taking the family into account. Yet the families, and mainly the women within it, are crucial providers of welfare. Researchers on care[5] explore this dimension, and have expanded from a focus on the family (Finch and Groves 1983) to a broader perspective from which they analyze the distribution of responsibilities concerning the provision of and payment for care between the family, the market, the state and the third sector (Daly and Lewis 2000; Jenson 1997). Therefore, introducing the family also produces a shift in attention from the type of social policies privileged by mainstream research -- pensions, health and employment insurance -- to family and care policies, and to their impact on women. These policies can either remain "implicit," or be institutionalized in an explicit family policy[6], as is the case in France, and more recently, in Quebec (Dandurand and St-Pierre 2001). Such institutionalized family policies involve a distinct administration devoted

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defamilialization is quite different, and refers to the capacity to secure a socially acceptable standard of living without the need to rely on family relations (Lister 1997).

[5] Care, or "social care", as defined by Daly and Lewis (2000), refers to "the activities and relations involved in meeting the physical and emotional requirements of dependent adults and children, and the normative, economic and social frameworks within which these are assigned and carried out » (p.285).

[6] Dandurand and Bergeron (2001) have coined the term "explicit" family policy to refer to instances when family policy officially exist as a domain of state intervention, with programs under that name. In this respect, Quebec distinguishes itself from other Canadian provinces such as Alberta.

to family policy, and their main features are childcare provision, child allowances, and parental leaves.

Beyond criticism, feminist research has attempted to theorize on the impact of social policy from a gender perspective, either amending Esping-Andersen's theoretical frame in order to integrate a gender dimension to it (O'Connor 1993; Orloff 1993), or elaborating a whole new gender-specific typology, such as Lewis's typology of gender regimes based on the degree to which different welfare states conform to the male-breadwinner model (Lewis 1992).

However, in this growing body of research on gender and the welfare state, much more attention has been paid to the impact of social policy on women than to women's agency. This is rather surprising since Esping-Andersen's theory is not only descriptive but explicative as well, belonging to the power resources approach which notably stresses the role of social-democratic parties and unions in shaping social policy. The feminist critique of the mainstream definition of welfare state regimes should have led to a questioning of the main social and political actors identified in mainstream research as relevant actors in the field of social policy -- that is to say, mostly unions -- and to a focus on the role played by women's organizations in shaping social policy (Hobson and Lindholm 1997).

In fact, some research has been conducted from this perspective. Much historical work has been done on the role played by women in the emergence of welfare states (Offen 1984, Skocpol 1992, Jenson 1986, 1989, Michel and Koven 1990, Koven and Michel 1993), but less attention is paid to women's agency today and its role in contemporary welfare restructuring. Nevertheless, this body of research is coming into bloom. To name but a few authors, one can mention Mahon's work on women's organizing and childcare policy in Sweden and Canada ((Mahon 1999), or Bertone's study of the struggles for child care in Italy and Denmark (Bertone 2003). Like research on other aspects of welfare, studies of the role played by women's organizations in reshaping welfare states will unquestionably benefit from a comparative perspective. In this article, my goal is to contribute to this collective building of knowledge by analyzing the case of Quebec. Moreover, such an empirical perspective allows us to transcend the endless normative debate over the definition of gender interests (Morgan 2001). Below, I will present evidence to the effect that an empirical perspective does not allow any definitive answer on the subject, but it does enable further understanding of the way in which consensus building operates in defining the interest of gender.

**Women's agency: outside and within the state**

*The women's movement in Quebec*

For at least three reasons, Quebec is a privileged setting in which to study the action of the women's movement in the field of family law and family policy. First, Quebec feminists have a worldwide reputation of organizational and political strength, as has been illustrated repeatedly during the 1990s by the role that the Quebec women's movement has played in organizing marches for women's rights, among them the 1995 "bread and roses" march and the 2000 worldwide women's march[7].

Second, and most important for the present concern, this movement has expressed concern with family issues. The women's movement has a large sociological basis in Quebec, in part due to an old tradition of grassroots feminine associations often linked with the church (Cohen 1992, Lamoureux, Gélinas and Tari 1993). For example, one of the two main national women's organizations in Quebec, the AFEAS (Association feminine d'éducation et d'action sociale) was created in 1966 by a fusion of two women's organizations initially linked with the Catholic Church, the Union Catholique des Femmes Rurales (Catholic rural women's organization) (UCFR) and the Cercles d'économie domestique (household economy circles) (CED). The historical continuity between these organizations and the second-wave feminist movement (Cohen 1992), combined with the generally strong development and the pragmatism  of community groups in Quebec (Bélanger and Lévesque 1992), has led to an interesting configuration of organizations as far as the status of women in the family is concerned. Indeed, several important organizations stand at the intersection between the women's movement and the family movement, developing a feminist perspective on family issues - a perspective that, while feminist, is still respectful of family as a value.  In addition to the AFEAS (see above), one can name the FAFMRQ (Fédération des associations de familles monoparentales et recomposées du Québec[8]), a provincial-level federation of associations defending the rights of single parents (mostly mothers), and another group called "Naissance-Renaissance" ("Birth-rebirth"), whose purpose is to promote the rights and welfare of mothers during pregnancy and the child's first year (perinatality). Such organizations have stimulated the development of a feminist stand on family issues within the

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[7] For an overview of the Quebec women's movement, see Corbeil and Descarries (1997), Descarries (1998, 2001), Dumont 1992, Lamoureux (1986, 1992), Landry (1990)
[8] Association of Quebec single-parent and recomposed families.

women's movement at large, and in turn, some form of gender-awareness within the family movement.

Finally, family policy in Quebec was institutionalized in the 1980s -- later than in most western nations with an explicit family policy -- that is to say, after the rise of the second-wave women's movement. Thus, it provides a useful complement to studies of the role of feminine organizations in the rise of welfare states at the beginning of the century. Whereas most feminine organizations involved in the promotion of women's rights within the family at the beginning of the XXth century upheld a maternalist[9] stand, respecting the "separate spheres" ideology, the second-wave women's movement was largely built upon a questioning of the social norms regarding the sexual division of labor. Hence, taking a feminist stand on family issues became all-the-more delicate. This was because two of the main aims of the movement were (1) to free women from a family that was then defined as oppressive and (2) to define a new identity for women that would not be linked to the family. This particular context makes the Quebec case all the more interesting since the Quebec women's movement *did* take a stand on family issues.

*Women's policy machinery and family policy: beyond "the state"*

Instead of providing an account of the strategies developed by the women's movement at large, I chose to focus on a specific organization that sits at the intersection of the women's movement and the state: the Quebec Council on Woman's Status. Such a research strategy needs to be justified.

In the previous section, I have shown that state intervention regarding welfare and the family does not hold a universal meaning. The welfare state is neither inherently patriarchal nor women-friendly. Moreover, the meaning and direction of state intervention varies across public-policy domains. Following the lessons learned from the sociology of public action (Duran 1999), one can add a second level of complexity: "the state" is not a consistent entity, does not necessarily act in a consistent manner. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) have argued, there is contention within the state[10]. Contention can even be institutionalized within the state apparatus, as the Quebec Council on woman's status[11] (CWS) clearly illustrates.

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[9] According to Michel and Koven's definition, «We apply the term to ideologies that exalted women's capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality." (Michel and Koven 1990 p. 1079).

[10] For another example of the development of feminist contention within institutions, namely the Church and the Army, see Katzenstein (1998).

[11] The name of the council, "Conseil du statut de la femme" in French, was not translated in the English version of its founding law (RSQ C-59), which uses the French phrase " Conseil du statut de la femme,» and then refers to it as "the Council.». The phrase "Council on Woman's Status" is my literal translation of the council's name.

The CWS is an example of what the UN describe as "national policy machinery for the advancement of women." Stetson and Mazur suggest the label "women's policy machinery," in reference to "any structure established by government with its main purpose being the betterment of women's social status" (Mc Bride Stetson and Mazur 1995). Two main structures of this type exist in Quebec. The first, the Secretary on Woman's Condition (Secrétariat à la condition féminine), is an administrative structure created to support the minister in charge of woman's condition (Ministre chargée de la condition féminine). Its action is mainly within the state apparatus, not public. The second is the CWS, which is more accessible to investigation because part of its activity is public[12].

For at least three years before the creation of the CWS in 1973, the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ), one of the two main women's organizations in Quebec, had been demanding the creation of a "woman's office" (Collectif Clio 1992). The FFQ had taken an important part in the works of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Bird Commission), created in 1967 by Prime Minister Pearson to "inquire into the status of women in Canada and to recommend what steps might by taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian identity." The commission published its report in 1970. Following the work done by the Royal commission, the FFQ handed a memorandum to Prime Minister Bourassa in 1971 demanding that a "Woman's Office" be created. Following this, Congress unanimously passed Law 63, creating the Quebec Council on Woman's Status, on July 6th, 1973.

The creation of the Quebec CWS must be understood in the broader context of the "quiet revolution," an era of accelerated social change that took place in Quebec in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the state played an important role in economic and social modernization. Through the diffusion of this modernizing trend, the state managed to take over social control which previously had been the prerogative of the Church. At that time, the women's movement appeared like a possible ally for the state in this modernization process (Descarries 1999; Lamoureux 2001); hence the creation of a body specifically aimed at representing women within the state. We will now see how this institutionalization process created contention within the state.

The Council is a governmental body which comprises two parts: the council in the strict sense, composed of ten members and a Chair, and a support structure comprising sixty-four civil servants. The members and Chair of the council are appointed by the government for four and five years, respectively (RSQ C-59, art. 8). The law strictly defines the composition of the council, in terms of the members' origins: four persons must be chosen among those

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[12] It should be noted that similar institutions have also been created in Canada at the federal level (Geller-Schwartz 1995)

recommended by the women's associations, two among those recommended by the representative socio-economic groups, two among those recommended by the syndicates, and two among those recommended by the university sector[13] (RSQ C-59, art. 7).

The Council's mission is threefold: to *advise* the government on all issues regarding the status of women, to *conduct research,* and to *inform* the general public regarding these issues. While the council must respond to the minister on any subject that is submitted to it (RSQ C-59, art. 3), it may also initiate research, inform the public, and provide unsolicited advice to the government (RSQ C-59, art. 3, 5, 6). Although the council in the strict sense (the ten members and the chair) makes the final decisions, the sixty-four-member-administration of the council has a strong influence on the positions that are adopted. Having an administration of its own allows the council to develop its own expertise on the issues with which it chooses to deal, and therefore speak in a "different voice," that distinguishes itself from both the demands of the women's movement and from the governmental view. The latter remark may sound odd because the council is itself a governmental body; yet it often has developed quite a stance in opposition to some of the policies carried out by Quebec governments over the years, as attested to in the example of its interventions in the field of family policy. Moreover, the council often acts as an outside actor, a stance similar to that of the women's movement in its attitude towards the government: it deposits memoranda to parliamentary hearings, writes letters to ministers, uses the media to voice disagreement with governmental policy.

Not only is the Council frequently critical, but its criticisms are also voiced publicly. The council's reports are published and widely disseminated throughout state institutions, community organizations, women's groups, and universities. The Council issues three types of reports, corresponding to its three missions: research reports, advisory reports and information brochures. When the Council takes up a particular subject, its research staff first conducts an investigation on the subject which results in a research report. Frequently, this is followed by an advisory report that draws on the main conclusions of the research report in order to provide recommendations. These recommendations can also be presented during parliamentary hearings or through letters to ministers. The Council also prepares and distributes to the public, brochures that provide information dealing with facts about women, women's rights, and the council's activities and recommendations. Finally, the Council publishes a magazine, *The women's Gazette* (*La Gazette des femmes*), which has a wide circulation in Quebec. Although the Council voices criticism, within the government and

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[13] Apart from these full rights members, are also members *ex officio* but not entitled to vote: the deputy minister of health and social services,: the deputy minister of education, the deputy minister of justice, the deputy minister of labour, the deputy minister of employment and social security, the secretary of the treasury council and the deputy minister of culture and communications, or their delegates.

publicly, it should be noted that the degree of criticism that the Council can allow itself is limited by its status as a governmental body: it must remain credible to the government.

*The Council facing the development of a distinct family policy*

Family policy provides a case in point to study this critical voice within the state apparatus. Indeed, the second-wave women's movement has denounced the family the as the root of women's oppression (Flax 1982). Although family policy can theoretically be conducted so as to foster women's autonomy, it often has been the vehicle for a traditional vision of the family with a strict sexual division of labor, and it often has been used against women's social and body rights. As Commaille (1993, 2001) has shown, family policy in France (which was an example for the family movement in Quebec) long has been marked by the seal of familialism, a perspective that considers family as an institution first, regardless of the interests or rights of individuals. As Commaille stresses, this principle stands in full opposition to feminism, which promotes the rights of individuals. Therefore, one can expect that the development of a distinct family policy will appear as a threat to many feminists.

In the face of a threat, two main types of reactions can be expected from a social movement: *voice*, leading to contention against the expected policy, and *exit*, which in this case would mean the refusal to take a stand on the issue, given the limited chances of impact and the risk of legitimizing a "family" perspective by participating in the debate. This is exactly the dilemma facing the Quebec women's movement and the CWS when the prospect of the development of a distinct family policy became clearer at the beginning of the 1980s[14]. At first, the women's movement was on the defensive. So was the CWS, whose Chair at the time, Claire Bonenfant, explicitly voiced the fear that the institutionalization of a family policy might lead to pronatalistic measures (CWS 1982a)[15]. Unquestionably, Quebec feminists had been tackling family related issues for some years, struggling for childcare, maternity leave, and for the payment of family allowances to mothers. The CWS itself had launched several reports on family-related issues before the 1980s, be it the reform of family law at the end of the 1970s (1979c), the development of child care facilities (1979a), or maternity leaves (1979b, 1980). Yet women's groups were suspicious of the "family perspective" implied by the prospect of a distinct family policy. Because the women's movement was reluctant, the CWS might well have ignored the issue, not taking stand on it. Had they done so, there would have been no open contention on the family issue within the state apparatus.

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[14] Such a policy had been advised by the family movement since the 1970s (see Lemieux and Comeau 2002)
[15] Reports by the CWS that are mentioned in this paper are listed in a separate bibliography at the end of the paper.

Therefore, a prerequisite in order for contention to appear was that the CWS decide to take part in the debate. The conditions that favored such an option require examination. According to political opportunity theories (Kitschelt 1986), mobilization develops when opportunities of success are open. This theoretical frame, initially developed for social movements, can be used to account for mobilization *within* the state - at least it is my claim. Opportunities of success are linked to the existing representation of the movement's interests in the political process, among other things. According to this perspective, the choice made by the CWS to take a stand on family policy is understandable in relation to the sizeable material and symbolic space already allocated to women's interests and representatives within the state, as opposed to that granted to representatives of family interests – a phenomenon that can be linked with the context of the quiet revolution described above. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1980s, when the CWS had experienced an ongoing growth in terms of both staff and budget[16], the representation of family interests at the governmental level was still very limited. This representation was expressly ensured by a Social Affairs and Family Council (Conseil des affaires socials et de la famille, CASF), whose prerogatives went well beyond family issues. The family council (Conseil de la famille) which was created later (in 1988) always remained a much smaller structure, in terms of staff and budget, than the CWS[17]. In the early 1980s, one finds a further sign of the Quebec government favoring women's interests over family interests in the composition of the committee which was created in order to organize a consultation on the implementation of a family policy, in which 2 of the 3 members appointed by the government belonged to the women's movement.

Given the structure of political opportunities at the time, the CWS could rely on having a good chance of influencing the future policy that would be developed. To speak in Hirshmann's terms – "voice" appeared to be a superior strategy to "exit" (Hirshman 1970). The risk implied by the "voice" strategy was that of contributing to the legitimization of a familialistic perspective by accrediting the family as a relevant public issue, but, on the other hand, there was a fair chance of gaining access to the political process in this policy domain, thereby gaining an opportunity to influence it. Therefore, the CWS took part in the debate in order to try to redefine family policy on feminist grounds. At the same time, the CWS first organized a mobilization of bias (Bachrach and Baratz 1970), arguing, on budgetary grounds, against any further institutionalization of family interests within the state. (CWS 1985a, 1986).

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[16] Between 1973 and 1980, the CWS had gone from 16 employees and an annual budget of 64 500 $ to 66 employees and an annual budget of 1 950 200 $(annual reports of the CWS).
[17] For example, in 1997 the CWS had a budget of 4 million dollars while the family council had a budget of 566 000 $.

Since this decisive step at the beginning of the 1980s, the CWS has systematically contributed to the ongoing debates on family policy, family law, and related issues, be they the definition of the general principles of a family policy (in 1985 and 1997), family law reform, pensions, child support[18], tax laws, maternity and parental leave, domestic violence, demography, cohabitation, family mediation, public services and "social economy,» social security, childcare, ambulatory care, or the status of same-sex spouses.

There are two points that I will make in the next section regarding the stance that the CWS has assumed over the years in the field of family policy: first, I will present the way in which CWS challenges the usual framing of family policy by emphasizing the individual, as opposed to stressing the family unit as the basis of analysis and policy-making; second, one must answer the question of how the CWS defines "the political interests of gender," as far as family policy is concerned.

## Methodology

This study of the stands taken and the strategies developed by the Quebec Council on woman's status is based upon the in-depth computed content analysis of a body of 30 reports issued by the Council, selected among a total collection of 160 reports dealing with family policy and family law, written between 1977 and 2002. I selected these reports according to the following criteria: first, from among the three types of documents edited by the CWS (research reports, advisory reports and information brochures), I chose to select only advisory reports, because they are specifically aimed at convincing the government and legislature and are adopted through a voting process by the council. Owing to this, they contain more direct political value than the other types of documents. Second, I chose at least one advisory report pertaining to each important public policy domain within the broad category of family policy. Finally, I wished to ensure as much temporal diversity as possible, during the period from the late seventies to the present time. Coding was elaborated from a grounded-theory perspective, with a gradual redefinition of the codes as the analysis went on. The aim of the analysis was to specify: on the one hand, the goals pursued by the council in the fields of family law and family policy and how they revealed a particular framing of women's identity; on the other hand, to specify the strategies developed by this governmental body in order to gain

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[18] regarding the issues of taxation, fixing and payment.

recognition and bring about change in this public-policy domain.

I also conducted interviews with employees of the Council, women's right activists, and a few important political actors in the field of family policy. The interviews enabled me to verify some of the interpretations to which the archive work had led, and to accrue additional information that could not be inferred from the reports, especially concerning the "stand-making process" within the institution. This is the process by which the advisory reports are elaborated, a process that implies consensus-building both within the institution and between the council and outside actors among them women's groups and the government. I took advantage of the interviews in order to learn more about the relationships between the council and other key political actors in the field of family policy: the family movement, the women's movement, and governmental bodies in charge of family policy. Finally, I asked civil servants working for the council about their everyday life in the council, with a specific focus on the way research was conducted within the institution.

## Towards a frame transformation: from the family to the individual unit as a basis for social policy

I have suggested earlier that the CSW often develops a critical viewpoint as regards governmental action. This is all the more true in the field of family policy, since an explicit family policy often relies on the assumption that the family can be considered as a unit with a common interest. This cognitive grounding of family policy must be stressed in order to understand the fundamental way in which a feminist perspective finds itself in contradiction with family policy as it is traditionally defined. To account for this cognitive dimension, one can use Goffman's concept of frame (Goffman 1974), as it was transferred into political sociology by Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) to account for the cognitive processes implied in individual mobilization. This concept can be extended further in order to conceptualize the cognitive link between social movements and public policy (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996).

From this perspective, it can be said that the usual frame of reference in family policy is the family unit. Substantial illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the rhetoric used by the family movement in Quebec (Lemieux and Comeau 2002), and in the documents issued by the Quebec's family council between 1988 and 1997, where the most often cited subject is the family. As opposed to this "family unit" frame, the cognitive frame promoted by the CWS is grounded on the rights of individuals within the family – mostly women, but also children

and youngsters by an "extension" of the individual logic. This "individual" frame can be found in the CWS's own assertions in its reports, but it appears even more clearly in the public-policy recommendations that follow from this frame, and the redistribution they imply. Indeed, this cognitive background is not only symbolic; it has very material consequences in terms of redistribution. The focus on "the family" implies that the family has a common interest, that is, there are no diverging or conflictive interests within the family. This entails an assumption of solidarity among family members. In terms of provision, it means that rights and allowances can be attributed to the family at large, as opposed to its individual members. More often than not, advantages allotted to the family actually are allotted to the male breadwinner, especially when they are provided by means of the tax system. Indeed, when family allowances are provided by means of tax-deductions, they actually are given to the family members who pay taxes, or who pay the most taxes. This excludes, for instance, those women who do not pay taxes because they have insufficient or no employment income. In this "family-unit" perspective, solidarity among family members is assumed. Therefore, decision-makers do not care which individual gets the allowances in the family, since recipients are expected to share them with the rest of the family. As opposed to this provision of allowances to families at large, the CWS has always insisted on the fact that allowances be provided to individuals – especially to women - within the family. For this reason (among others, notably in terms of social justice), the CWS has always favored cash allowances as opposed to tax provisions. In this respect, one should note that the CWS is thankful that the Quebec tax system is based on individual, not family, taxation (unlike the French system, for instance). The Council always has promoted this type of taxation and opposed the trends towards family taxation (CWS 1987, 1997).

Moreover, the "family focus" leads familialists to use the family income as a basis for the calculating of entitlement and the amount of support given by the state when these are income-based. The CWS, on the contrary, has always argued that entitlement should be individually based (within the limits of what is financially possible for the government), and that income-based provisions should be supplied according to individual and not family income (CWS 1985).

Finally, the emphasis laid on familial unity may lead to an underestimation of the existence of diverging interests, and even conflict, within the family. A salient case in point is the issue of domestic violence, which the Quebec women's movement has brought to the political agenda and which has been tackled reluctantly by the family council under the form of "family violence" ("violences familiales"), whereas the women's movement stressed spousal violence ("violences conjugales") (CWS 1993).

Therefore, given the strong opposition between the "family unit" and the "individual" frame, one may say that the CSW, through its various interventions in the field of family policy, has been working towards a "frame transformation,» a term that was coined by Snow *et al.* (1986) in order to describe the most radical adaptation that could be required from one frame to another.

**Defining the interest of gender in family policy and family law**

*Gender and the family: a web of contradictions*

Once it has been established that the general meaning of the CWS's intervention in the field of family policy was a rejection of the "family unit" frame of thinking and a promotion of individual rights, what can be said, in more positive terms, about the stands that they have taken? How is a common interest among women defined in the field of family policy? As a governmental body, the Council must ensure adequate representation of the female population. In practice, through the Council's everyday production of knowledge (research) and advice (recommendations to the government), political representation takes the form of cognitive representation. The council's stances are framed by a representation of a collective identity of women that has to be built in spite of the possible contradictions between the interests of different categories of women. The study of the council's interventions become more interesting when we see that these contradictions are many, especially when one considers women's relationship to social policy and family law. Yet collective identity must not be studied as a mere symbolic dimension: the building of collective identity relies on very concrete resources, and for this reason I have laid emphasis on the council's organization.

I will address now the many obstacles that the CWS faces in the process of defining the "interests of gender" in the field of family policy: not only do the interests of different categories of women vary, but the CWS faces the potentially contradictory demands of numerous women's groups. How does it manage to define a common interest, in order to make sense of its own existence, in spite of these difficulties?

*Diversity among women*

From a feminist perspective, family policy is a thorny issue, especially at a time when family change is occurring very quickly, in relation to general trends, among them the decrease in fertility rates and the rise in employment of women – especially mothers. One must stress that these changes have been dramatically quick in Quebec, with the fertility rate dropping from 3.858 in 1960 to 1.452 in 2000[19], and the employment rate of women rising from 25.3% in 1961 to 51.8% in 2001[20].

In such a changing context, more than ever, the interests of different categories of women are likely not to coincide as far as family policy is concerned. To give but one example, in the field of family law: women who have gained autonomy through paid employment would tend to oppose a legal definition of marriage imposing strong obligations between spouses, whereas women who must rely on their husband's income in order to secure a socially acceptable standard of living would tend to favor such legal guarantees, which endow them with a *right* to financial support from their husbands instead on simply relying on their husband's largesse.

### *Diversity among women's groups*

The representation issue is made even more complex by the contradictory stances occasionally taken up by different women's groups in the field of family policy.

Just as there is diversity among women, the women's movement does not always speak in a single, unified, voice -- although efforts are being made to form coalitions in order to gain efficiency. Many women's groups are specialized, and aim at representing, not women as a whole, but specific categories of women: for example day-care workers, single mothers, professional women.  Hence, the occasionally competing goals of different women's groups can reflect the conflicting interests of different categories of women. For instance, organizations that promote the social rights of professional caregivers may find their goals to contradict those of the groups that defend the employment rights of the middle-class women who employ them. Moreover, there are, of course, different ideological trends within the women's movement (Descarries and Roy 1988).

### *Defining a common interest*

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[19] Institut de la Statistique du Québec:
http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/donstat/societe/march_travl_remnr/parnt_etudn_march_travl/pop_active/taux_emploi_1c.htm

[20] I am thankful to Sylvie Gilbert, from the Institut de la Statistique du Québec, for providing these statistics upon my  request.

This context makes it all the more challenging for the CWS to define a common identity for women. As a governmental body, the CWS is supposed to represent women as a whole, not granting privileges to any specific category over another. Simultaneously, this challenge faced by the CWS is what makes it highly interesting to study. Then, how does the CWS define what I will call here a "general interest" of women? The answer is twofold. Although the CWS has normative beliefs as regards what is good for women in the long run, it accepts the necessity of compromise and dialogue with other definitions of women's interests.

According to the CWS, paid employment is obviously the favored path for women. The CWS explicitly expresses this belief several times in its reports: "According to us, paid employment is the best path towards autonomy;"[21] "The best bulwark against poverty is quality employment."[22] Therefore, most of the Council's recommendations in the field of family policy aim at making it easier for women to access to or remain on the labor market, despite the social norms regarding the sexual division of labor that imposes upon them the burden of unpaid care work in the family. In this respect, the CWS and the Quebec women's movement have been very strong advocates of day-care centers (CWS 1979a, 1989). The CWS has also been a strong advocate of the rights related to maternity leave (CWS 1990), leading to legal guarantees that a woman will have access to her former position at the conclusion of her maternity leave.

One must stress that there have been other, more direct, challenges to the traditional assignment of care work to women. For instance, the CWS was a major advocate of father leave in Quebec -- a measure it had been advocating since the end of the 1980s (CWS 1990) and that was enacted into family policy in 1997[23] (CWS 1997). However, this appeal to further male participation in care work is limited for several reasons. First, its advocacy might not be unanimous within the women's movement, not as a general principle, although some women might hesitate to yield the minimum power they have in the family -- for many, their only source of power and self-esteem -- but in the sense that giving care rights to fathers may involve political bargaining with women's care rights. Second, the CWS finds it safer to rely on the state's than on men's involvement in care work, through the collectivization of care and work-family reconciliation policies. This relies on the assumption that public policy can be changed faster than "mentalities."

The promotion of paid labor as a means of economic emancipation leads to a rejection of any public policy or legal device that might encourage women to stay at home – for example,

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[21] "Le travail rémunéré représente selon nous la meilleure voie d'accès à l'autonomie" (CSF 1988 p.50)

[22] "Le meilleur rempart contre la pauvreté demeure l'emploi de qualité" (CSF 1997 p.18).

[23] However, the reform of the parental leave system has undergone difficulties in its implementation due to a conflict between the provincial and the federal governments over the financial provision for this program.

wages for housewives[24] -- and to a rejection of any vehicle that discourages them from entering or remaining in the labor force: joint taxation,[25] tax incentives that discourage "second income" (such as tax deductions granted to a spouse when the other spouse stays at home[26]), family income - based (family) allowances.[27] This claim has been expressed quite frequently in the reports I studied (I found 34 instances).

Because the CWS promotes paid employment for women, the social rights it advocates are, for the most part, employment-related. Yet, the CWS is not gender-blind, and it is perfectly aware that women's traditional assignment to care work within the family undermines their position in the labor market. Hence, employment-related social rights may not prove a sufficient guarantee of economic and social security for women. Therefore, the Council could be tempted to promote care as well as a basis of entitlement. However, promoting care in itself, or the choice between care and paid employment, as a basis of entitlement, goes against two of the council's goals, which are: not to discourage women's employment, and to remain credible before the government (indeed, entitlement based on care often is considered financially unsupportable if valid, solid social rights are to be secured). The solution to this dilemma lies in social rights whose entitlement is based upon employment, but which also take into account the care work performed by women within the family. Let us consider the case of pensions, a classic example in welfare-state studies. In Quebec, state pension reform during the early 1980s provoked much debate within and among women's groups between advocates and critics of a pension based on care, that is, that housewives would be entitled to a pension on the grounds of the care work they performed. After much deliberation (CWS 1982b), the CWS finally opted for a compromise. It asked that, for a woman who was in the labor force before and after some years spent at home (or working part-time) caring for a child, those years would count, in terms of pension entitlement, as though they had been spent working full-time. That is, employment would remain the basis for entitlement to state pensions, but the absences due to care work would not represent a penalty in terms of pensions (CWS 1985b). Here, social rights linked to employment are adapted in order to take into account the reality of care work performed in the family.

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[24] The CWS's opposition to wages for housewives was explicitly phrased in its 1978 general policy statement *Pour les Québécoises: égalité et independence* (CWS 1978).

[25] Joint taxation usually discourages women's participation into the labor force because the income they make on the labor market has to outweigh the loss induced by the second income in terms of taxation (the family income bears a heavier fiscal burden because of the second income).

[26] Such a measure has been condemned on three grounds: it is unfair (the tax deduction should be granted to the one doing the housework), it discourages women's employment, and it turns the latter into a family decision instead of an individual decision, so that women are put into a situation where they have to negotiate their right to being employed with their husband.

[27] Family income-based allowances have been condemned on the same grounds as joint taxation, in the sense that the second income induces a loss in state support (or, in the case of taxation, a heavier fiscal burden): the "second income" can cause the family income to exceed the threshold of eligibility to family allowances. For that reason, women may be encouraged to stay out of the labor force, or to work only part-time.

Yet, the CWS also acknowledges that paid employment might not be easily attainable to all women on a short-term basis. Thus, it accepts consideration of other means of economic security. As we will see, this is where family law comes into play.

Sainsbury (1996) distinguishes four main bases of entitlement to social rights: employment, care, maintenance, and citizenship. We have seen that care is usually not contemplated as a basis of entitlement in itself, regardless of employment status. Citizenship, defined in terms of nationality or residence, usually is not considered to be a possible basis for solid enough social rights. Therefore, employment remains the main grounding for social rights in the CWS's recommendations. However, what if employment is unreachable? The issue is of particular salience for a generation of women who spent their lives as housewives and find themselves, at age fifty or more, living in economic precariousness due to divorce or to the loss of a husband. We are left with the last term of Sainsbury's typology, maintenance -- a situation in which a woman's social entitlement derives from that of her husband (Sainsbury also refers to it as the *breadwinner model*). Yet the concept of maintenance needs to be further clarified, because it can relate to two quite different situations, according to the absence or presence of the law in the maintenance process.

In the first configuration, the breadwinner is the only legally entitled person. Not only is entitlement based upon his work, but while social rights granted to the husband are designated to benefit the family as a whole, following this principle, there is no individual entitlement of other family members. Therefore a married woman must rely on her husband's generosity to attain some form of economic security. While I suggested that the law was absent in this case -- no individual social right is defined for the woman -- this statement must be qualified because the legal definition of marriage in civil law usually includes an obligation of maintenance and assistance. Yet this general principle is not defined in terms of individual right, and its content must be specified by courts.

Another acceptance of the maintenance basis for social rights implies that individual entitlement: rights are derived from the husband's breadwinner status but granted to the wife on an individual basis[28]. If we return to the pension reform of the early 1980s, we find another recommendation made by the CWS to the effect that a husband's pension plans be shared with his wife when he retires, even if the couple is still together (and not only in case of a divorce) (CWS 1985b).

The family patrimony[29], enacted in 1989, can also be analyzed in terms of maintenance insured by the law. The family patrimony is a provision by which regardless of the marriage settlement, property and belongings commonly used by the spouses, *e.g.* real estate and cars,

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[28] Sainsbury (1996) also makes this distinction.

are presumed a common good and must be equally shared between the spouses in case of divorce or death of one of the spouses. This is a very strong legal provision because equal sharing is imposed regardless of the marriage settlement, even in the case of a marriage settlement based on separate ownership of property. Therefore, even if the wife has not contributed to the acquisition of these, she is still entitled to half of the goods. This often is the case in households with a strong division of labor, in which the woman remains at home. Brought to the political agenda by the women's movement, the idea of creating a family patrimony was controversial. There were oppositions to it within and without the women's movement, with some women opposing a legislation that they believed would lead to an even more rigid and prescriptive legal definition of marriage. Yet, most women argued that it was the best way in which to ensure housewives some form of economic security in case of divorce. This was at a time when the amount of child support was not yet legally defined, and its payment not yet guaranteed by the state. Therefore, the CWS chose to back the reform (CWS 1988).

## Bridging social and civil rights

Thus, through claims such as that in favor of the enactment of a family patrimony, the CWS, reflecting the diverse aspirations of the Quebec women's movement, considered other bases of entitlement than employment. Here, family law, and not social policy, is involved: civil, and not social rights, are at stake. However, the underlying issue is the same, women's economic independence. This is why one can argue that, even though the CWS clearly favors paid employment as a means of economic independence for women, employment is merely a means to an end, the crucial issue being autonomy. Because autonomy, more than a model of labor division or another, is the core of the matter, the CWS has, in the end, a rather pragmatic view of autonomy: paid employment is the best path towards independence, but, to put it simply, anything will do as long as economic independence is eventually ensured. However, this statement must be qualified: the measures promoted must not discourage paid employment. Therefore, the CWS has been reluctant to promote entitlement based on care, which could play against women's employment and position on the labor market. This is why family law comes to play a strategic role: it can be mobilized in favor of women's economic security when employment is unreachable. Hence, the CWS is open to other means of increasing women's economic security, even through reliance on the husband, provided this maintenance is ensured by law in the form of individual right. Therefore, from pensions to marriage settlement, from parental leave to divorce regulation, it can be said that the issue of

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[29] For more information on the family patrimony, refer to the Quebec Department of Justice : http://www.justice.gouv.qc.ca/english/publications/generale/patrimoine-a.htm#meant

women's autonomy, considered from the point of view of the family, clearly bridges social and civil rights. Hence, we argue that legal theory should be more systematically integrated into welfare research, since family law is equally important as is social policy in defining women's economic citizenship.

## Conclusion: gender and the family: a political perspective

The increasing complexity of public-policy making processes (and thereby of law-making processes, in a Civil law context), notably stressed by the sociology of public action (Duran 1999), calls our attention to atypical political actors like the Quebec CWS, which stands at the interface of government, social movements and expertise. In analyzing the stands taken by the Council in the field of family policy, I have laid a strong emphasis on identity building and on the cognitive processes at stake – showing that the general meaning of the feminist intervention in this field was a frame transformation, aiming at a shift from a "family unit" frame to an "individual" frame. However, I have demonstrated that these cognitive processes cannot possibly be fully understood and explained unless they are systematically linked with the organizational, institutional and relational settings in which they take place. In order to understand the way that the CWS defines women's interests in the field of family policy, one must take into account its internal organization (notably the expertise resources from which it benefits, and the inside consensus building among the members of the council) as well as its relations to other actors (women at large, the government, women's groups) and its institutional resources and power. Similarly, one must stress that cognitive frames are not only symbolic, but also have very material consequences[30]. In the process of defining a common interest and a collective identity for women in the field of family policy, the CWS is faced with many contradictions, between the potentially diverging interests of different categories of women, and between the various demands of women's groups. Yet the focus on individual autonomy, and the decision to define individual autonomy as the key issue (before even taking a stand on the "equality vs. difference" debate), enable the CWS to overcome these contradictions. Finally, this focus on individual autonomy bridges social and civil rights – a fact that should be further taken into account in feminist theories of the welfare state.

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[30] In this respect, the concept of citizenship, as defined by Jane Jenson in her concept of citizenship regimes (Jenson 1997), allows a simultaneous consideration of both dimensions: citizenship defines identities, but it also circumscribes an institutional definition of social rights (that is to say, material provision by the state).

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## Online resources

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Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance (Council on family and childhood, former family council): www.cfe.gouv.qc.ca

Institut de la statistique du Québec: http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/default.htm

Ministère de la Justice du Québec : http://www.justice.gouv.qc.ca/english/accueil.asp