

Book Reviews

Recensions

Beyond Caring Labour to Provisioning Work

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In its 10 chapters written by the four authors, with individual chapters from two research assistants, Sandra Tam and Judy Cerny, this book examines the work that women do to sustain themselves and their families. In this welcome addition to the rapidly growing research on women's work, citizenship, and neo-liberalism, the authors start by reviewing the main theories and concepts driving this multidisciplinary discussion. In Chapters 1 and 2, the authors give a conceptual overview of women's work and outline the book's empirical project. The central aim of these chapters is to question both social capital approaches and much of the feminist literature arising from the work of T.H. Marshall and Gøsta Esping-Andersen that focuses on market economy as a central determinant of women's citizenship. Through this theoretical questioning, they challenge the notion of dual spheres (p.19): where women work at home while men participate in wage work.

Although their main criticism of the dual spheres argument is not new, the authors offer a fresh approach to long-standing feminist debates on the notion of "work." They move beyond the market economy to use a core concept from economic feminists of "provisioning" which they define as "work needed to realize the necessities and conveniences of life" (p. 4) "to those for whom [women] have responsibility" (p. 5). In chapters 3 to 9, the authors present empirical evidence to engage with different strands of feminist literature, arguing that the provisioning concept changes how we look at women's work, allowing us to challenge the oppressive policies of the Neo-Liberal era.

The book's empirical project was designed to be a type of participatory action research (described in a detailed Appendix). It is based on 100 interviews, plus focus groups with 138 key

informants, all women, in six sites/organizations in British Columbia and Ontario, half in large urban centres and half in medium-sized cities. The participants reflect “intersectionalities” (p.17, 23) with regard to gender, age, social class, immigrant status, and racialized group membership. The sites/organizations were selected for their capacity for “innovative work with marginalized groups” (p.6). The interviews and focus groups were aimed at uncovering the full range of women's provisioning activities, including paid work, caring work, and community work, all of which contain activities and strategies that are largely invisible, due to dominant public/private and paid/unpaid work dualisms.

Chapter 3 presents useful conceptual and operational summaries and tables of women's provisioning activities and strategies. These are presented as manifesting women's agency, or “civil society engagement”,(p. 43) as community activism, forming a basis for alternative citizenship claims that have the potential to challenge the neo-liberal tide, a point further elaborated in the two concluding chapters. This chapter and the following one also outline how provisioning can be operationalized. This is a complex framework, and considers women's work in the paid economy, household, and community, as well as their activism, or "civil society engagement" (p.43). In so doing, the book brings attention to women's agency, and the meaning of work for women's identity.

The provisioning framework is elaborated upon in the middle chapters (5-8), with examples from young, racialized women, immigrant mothers, older women, and low-income women, facing neo-liberal attacks on the range of services that would alleviate their difficulties. The authors compare the examples of provisioning and agency, with the stated goal of observing intersectionalities. For example, they find that child care, community work, and health and safety emerge as key concerns for immigrant mothers (Chapter 6), whereas careers are the focus of young, racialized women (Chapter 5). Specifically, Sandra Tam's chapter is based on 20 interviews with young "at risk" racialized women, and focuses on discrimination they face in their work and community organizations. The chapter is critical of these organizations that approach racism as an individualistic problem, rather than as a wider issue of social relations and collective responsibility. Such an approach reflects a neo-liberal attitude, which frames all problems as individual failings while undermining women's capacity to address racist social institutions struggling amidst deteriorating services.

Judy Cerny's chapter offers results from 28 interviews with low-income women, most born outside Canada. In highlighting the working lives of immigrant and refugee women, she addresses children's needs and how low-income mothers struggle to meet them amidst insufficient state-supported child care services. She finds that many women respond by taking on multiple jobs as volunteer workers and community advocates. Stresses of low-income living produce health problems for both mothers and their children, which these women try to combat by struggling to deal with the wide range of social service agencies that have been eviscerated by neo-liberal reforms.

Chapter 7 continues the theme of social care on how to make older women's caring work visible. Based on 18 interviews and two focus groups with mainly white older women, the chapter addresses multiple types of care, ranging from financial to emotional to health care, that older women offer to immediate family, relatives, friends, and neighbours. Much of these women's dealings with the outside world consist of “making claims” (p.107) to being an active participant in their lives and those of others, rather than being seen as stereotypical “dependent” older women with few faculties and resources. The work these women do is often overlooked, rendering both the women themselves and the work they do invisible to the greater community. This work needs to be recognized and these women's needs addressed.

Chapter 8 follows up on issues faced by low-income women, based on interviews with 58 low-income women about provisioning strategies and how community groups contribute to their provisioning. The chapter stays true to the book's theme by outlining new categories that encompass the notion of provisioning: self-provisioning, small-scale entrepreneurial activity, exchanges of goods and services, managing scarce resources, and community managing work. The authors also add the category of provisioning under tough economic times, including changing household membership, adjustments in consumption patterns, and informal economic activities. The chapter underlines the detrimental consequences of the invisibility of the wide range of women's provisioning activities on social policy formulation. The main point is that true costs of neo-liberal attacks on the population are hidden, with low-income women increasingly bearing the burden.

Chapter 9 discusses the role and strategic potential of women's organizations to meet women's needs. Amidst the attack on women's organizations and the push for women to respond to the increasing needs due to neo-liberal service cutbacks, community organizations are struggling to redefine their mandates and scope. This leads to struggles over diminishing returns among women's organizations, which are in danger of losing their focus on their collectivity over bureaucratic demands. They are challenged to build solidarity, foster mutual respect, and to connect to strategic goals. These aims, according to the authors, are worth fighting for, and can provide the kind of "authentic public space" (p. 148) that can truly challenge the neo-liberal ethos.

Chapter 10 moves to the terrain of "quality of life" by resuming the initial chapters' claims for the need to go beyond the economic to capture what provisioning is all about. The main point is that women's provisioning responsibilities are not free goods – as depicted by neo-liberal reformers – but a significant addition to everyone's quality of life. This assertion calls for widening citizenship claims beyond market elements to fully account for and respect women's contributions.

Overall, the authors should be commended for the scope of their work. Not only do they take on a large number of feminist debates and bodies of literature (on work, social policy, women's organizations and agency, and volunteer/NGO activities) but they also propose new ways of approaching the field. Though the lines of reasoning the authors present are not new, they do bring the strands of research traditions together in a unique way. At the same time, there are some weaknesses. The middle chapters on intersectionalities in provisioning are uneven in quality; not all of them deal with the conceptual framework to the same degree. Although the two final chapters provide general and conceptually driven policy recommendations, specific policies are covered in just under three pages (pp.159-161). Furthermore, more explanation is required on how the concept of provisioning would result in new policy approaches, beyond customary suggestions in the feminist literature for more woman-friendly workplaces, including parental leaves and publicly funded child care.

Moreover, the notion of provisioning can itself be criticized. Grounds for classification of specific activities are not always clear; the authors' point about making women's work visible has been made by others using different terminology. For example, in Chapter 3, health and safety activities are listed under "provisioning" rather than the customary classification of "care work," a choice that needs to be explained in more detail. Further, many activities and strategies involved in provisioning (Chapter 4) are extensively debated in existing literature on women's agency and organizing. Some careful reading is also required in many places, as the authors integrate concepts of identity, agency, and tasks/work in their complex framework in order to maintain the distinctive sense and significance of each term.

Aside from the thought-provoking conceptual probing, the book's main contribution is to highlight strategic needs of women's organizations under neo-liberalism. It provides examples of agency in various settings where women are fighting against the onslaught of new rules, regulations, and bureaucratic inflexibilities that make it more difficult for them to provide for themselves and their significant others. As the authors suggest, it is especially important to validate the vast range of women's work, particularly of those who are marginalized, in order to dispel the myth that women are "scrambling to offload" (p. 159) their social responsibilities.

The book's complexities make it extremely useful for graduate students and academics/researchers engaged with feminist debates on women, the welfare state, and citizenship. Information provided in specific chapters (5, 6, 7) also would be relevant for upper-level undergraduate social science courses. I particularly recommend Chapter 7 for courses on aging and gender, for its clear and comprehensive way of making older women's activities visible and overturning sexist and ageist notions of their presumed total dependence on others.