

Preface

This book began as a collaborative project by academics and researchers involved in the Toronto-based Feminism and Political Economy Network. For five years, an informal study group of about fifteen people from the southern Ontario region between Peterborough and St Catharines met monthly to read and discuss new scholarship in political economy and feminist theory. Collectively, participants in the network developed a deeper appreciation of the strengths of a feminist political economy approach in general and the theoretical and explanatory possibilities of feminist conceptualizations of social reproduction in particular.

The circumstances confronting feminists in Canada and in the province of Ontario specifically in the mid- to late 1990s underlined the need for feminist political economy. The Liberal federal government's elimination of the Canada Assistance Plan and its replacement with the Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1994 cut money transfers to provinces and territories and gave them significantly more power to determine which policy areas received funding. The election in 1995 of a Progressive Conservative government under Mike Harris resulted in a dramatic restructuring of Ontario's welfare state, affecting most aspects of social and economic life. The effects of neo-liberal policies and practices at the federal and provincial levels were profoundly gendered. The gains that women had won over the previous twenty years were eroded, and standards of living declined for many

women and men, and for poor women in particular. Despite the apparent gender neutrality of neo-liberal policy changes, the cumulative impact was harder on women. In the paid labour force, women's access to jobs, especially well-paid, secure jobs with benefits, is still more constrained than men's; few women earn enough to support themselves and their children.

At the same time, women continue to be primarily responsible for most informal, unpaid caregiving, such as looking after children and providing care to those who need it because they are ill or elderly or live with disabilities. Without adequate social services in areas such as child care or nursing homes, many women have to leave paid employment or at least reduce their hours of employment in order to provide care. As a result, their employment and earning capacities are undermined. When social services are not available, women tend to pick up the work. Their responsibilities for young children mean that many women have to rely on insufficient public income transfers for economic support. Neo-liberal policies in the 1990s exacerbated the tension between paid work and unpaid work, making it harder to balance competing demands.

Participants in the Feminism and Political Economy Network knew that what was happening in Ontario was an example of neo-liberalism at work. Similar policies had been implemented internationally by most of the major bodies regulating the global economy, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and a range of governments, both national and local (for example, in Britain following Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, in the United States under Reagan after 1981, and federally in Canada with the election of the Mulroney government in 1984). Although Ontario under Mike Harris, Alberta under Ralph Klein, and British Columbia under Gordon Campbell are the most visible examples of provincial neo-liberal projects, economic restructuring, privatization, and the downloading of care work characteristic of neo-liberalism are present in every province and territory. While each region produces its own specific socio-political and economic dynamics, the general trends are similar. Living through conservative times in Canada and in Ontario, to borrow Sylvia Bashevkin's (1998) phrase, gave participants in the Feminism and Political Economy Network a live example of the perils of ignoring the work of social reproduction. Many of the chapters in this book reflect that perspective.

A goal of the network was to understand the gendered dynamics of neo-liberalism, particularly their impact on women. The network was also committed to exploring the value of the theoretical framework offered by social reproduction to such a project. Individual members of the network developed research projects that examined such questions from a variety of perspectives. We also received a Special Initiative Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which allowed the Feminism and Political Economy Network to expand its scope to compare our research with colleagues in other parts of the country. In March 2003 we held a conference at York University called "Rethinking Social Reproduction." Most of the chapters in this book were presented initially as papers at that conference. We thank the SSHRCC for providing us with an opportunity (sadly all too rare in academic life these days) to meet and discuss our work. This book is one result of that initiative. It has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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