

# Editorial: Women, the Welfare State and Care-Giving

The next crisis of the welfare state will begin sometime after 2010 when the baby-boomers enter old age and begin drawing their pensions. Right? Wrong. The next crisis of the welfare state will be a result of the "care-giving crunch" and it is already with us.

The crisis in care-giving is a result of increased demand – there are more old people and they are living longer. Right? Wrong again. The crisis in care-giving is a result of a change in supply. As Alan Walker reminds us in the feature article of this issue of the *Canadian Journal on Aging*, the essential work of social reproduction – of looking after one another – is done by women. Some of this work is done by nurses, social workers, and other care-givers in the paid labour force. But now, as in the past, the bulk of this work is done by daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and female neighbours who look after men and one another as part of their unpaid domestic labour. The crisis in care-giving is a result of the dramatic decline in the amount of unpaid working time available to the women who have traditionally performed these tasks.

The social organization of care-giving in contemporary Canada is based on a model of family and work organization that is increasingly rare. In the postwar years, when many of our current social institutions were put in place, family labour time was divided between the paid labour of men and the unpaid labour of women in the care of children, the elderly and a host of community activities. Once the norm, such families are now the exception. In 1961, one-earner couples made up 65 per cent of all Canadian families. By 1986, one-earner couples accounted for just 12 per cent of all families (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1990: 15).

Few statistical time series in modern times show such dramatic change as the rise in the labour force participation of women, including women with small children at home. Between 1980 and 1990 the employment rate of women with children under the age of three rose from 36.8 per cent to 53.3 per cent (Statistics Canada, 1991: A-6). Less dramatic but no less important is the changing composition of households – more single person households and single parent families. The implications for the time budgets of families and households are striking. While hours in paid work have declined for individuals, for families and households they have increased dramatically. After World War II it was common for families to "sell" 48 hours of their time into the labour market (the normal work week of a full-time employed male); now the norm is between 60 and 80 hours (the combined work week of a two-earner couple).

The economy and society as a whole obviously benefit from the additional

labour time families put into the market. And the pursuit of equality for women depends upon it. But as over a decade of research has shown, the costs to women are high. Women's "double day" of paid work and unpaid domestic labour is now a well-documented fact of modern life. Neither men nor public policy have changed to accommodate this new reality. The result is that at the end of the 20th century society faces a crisis of care-giving, a direct result of the "time crunch" that now characterizes the female life course. The "yuppie years" soon give way to the time pressures of combining paid work with child-rearing and caring for men. Marital break-up brings extended periods of single-parenting to many women. As the nest begins to empty, a new time crunch emerges as elderly parents develop the illnesses and disabilities of old age. The burden of care-giving is exacerbated by the fact that smaller family sizes also mean fewer siblings and other kin available to help out.

What is most remarkable is that women continue to provide as much care as they do, often at enormous personal cost. Women turn down promotions, change jobs and work part-time in order to meet the needs of their immediate and extended families. In a national survey I conducted with my colleague Wallace Clement in the early '80s, 57 per cent of women aged 30–49 reported one or more of these "career disruptions" because of family obligations. As Walker reports, women provide these services even in the absence of strong relations of affection and reciprocity with the care recipient.

It is instructive to compare the "care-giving crunch" of the contemporary female life course with the "economic crunch" of earlier times. At the beginning of the century Rowntree described the typical working class life course as a "life cycle of poverty". Over the life course, the male-headed household typically passed through a succession of economic ups and downs that followed swings in the business cycle and the normal life course events of child-rearing, illness, unemployment and old age. Modern welfare states – including pension systems, unemployment insurance and family allowances – were mainly designed to smooth out these ups and downs of the economic life course.<sup>1</sup> The new challenge for social policy is to find ways of smoothing out the ebb and flow of the "care-giving crunch" of the contemporary female life course.

But how should we meet these new needs? During the '80s, as Walker notes, there was growing scepticism about the wisdom of turning to the "intrusive state" to solve the problems of individuals and families. At the same time, leading-edge corporations faced with high rates of absenteeism and problems of morale have been experimenting with highly innovative programs to help employees deal with their care-giving duties (see Kamerman and Kahn, 1987). If there is a lesson to be learned from the past, however, it is that private sector solutions will be partial and incomplete at best. New corporate practices designed to assist families with care-giving responsibilities tend to be confined to large, capital-intensive corporations and public sector employers. Smaller, labour-intensive firms (where most women are employed) lack this flexibility. Modern pension systems developed in much

the same way. During the '20s, "corporate welfare" programs, including pensions, were all the rage among leading-edge employers in Canada and the United States. But as every country quickly learned, the only way to ensure that even a modest pension was available to the majority of workers was to spread the costs across the economy as a whole through some form of national old age insurance scheme. The care-giving crisis will require the same sort of innovative collective solutions.

However, Walker also warns, correctly in my view, that the problem of care-giving will not be solved through national legislation alone. Conceptions of care-giving – and especially the sexual division of care-giving work – need to be reformulated at all levels of society. He points to the need for change in the organization and linkages between formal and informal care-giving networks, in the attitudes and professional values of the formal care-giving sector, and, I would add, in the organization of work place norms and personnel practices that regulate the lives of the majority of care-givers, male or female.

Enlightened social policies and improved work place practices can make the work of care-giving less of a burden and women's lives better. But it is clear from the experience of other countries that nothing short of a revolution in gender relations and in the sexual division of care-giving work is required to solve the problem. Sweden provides extended periods of paid leave and other forms of work absences for care-givers but most of these absences are taken by women and very rarely by men. Despite more progressive attitudes on such matters, Swedish men do little more than Canadian men in the domestic division of labour. There, as here, care-giving work is women's work.<sup>2</sup>

As we head toward the 21st century, it is clear that our traditional ways of thinking about social policy and the welfare state are of only limited use in addressing the issues that confront us. The contemporary welfare state is a product of another time. It brought important gains in the quality of working people's lives. And social provision for the elderly was by far the largest and most important part of this development. The new challenge to social policy is to find equally innovative solutions to the most basic of human activities – caring for one another. In the past, scholars, professionals and activists in the field of aging provided much of the leadership, energy and insight for finding solutions to the pressing problems of their time. As Walker's essay demonstrates, the tradition continues.

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## Notes

- 1 Today, women's employment is the most critical ingredient in stabilizing life-time family incomes. With the weakening of the welfare state in recent years, two-earner families are more essential than ever for helping families through periods of unemployment or illness.
- 2 These conclusions are based on identical national surveys in Canada, the United States, Sweden and Norway reported in Clement and Myles (forthcoming).

## References

- Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. (1990). *Women and Labour Market Poverty*. Ottawa.
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- Kammerman, Sheila & Kahn, Alfred. (1987). *The Responsive Workplace: Employers and a Changing Labor Force*. New York: Columbia University Press.
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