

Femocrats and Ecorats:  
Women's Policy Machinery in Australia,  
Canada and New Zealand

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Occasional Paper 6, March 1996

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development  
United Nations Development Programme

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Note: The pagination of the electronic version of this paper may differ from the printed publication.

ISSN 1020-3354

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## Preface

In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, UNRISD initiated an Occasional Paper Series reflecting work carried out under the UNRISD/UNDP project, **Technical Co-operation and Women's Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy**. In view of the intensified efforts in the aftermath of the Conference to integrate gender concerns into policy analysis and formulation, and the progress of the UNRISD/UNDP project, the Institute intends to publish several additional papers in this series to facilitate dissemination of the project's findings.

The activities of the project have included an assessment of efforts by a selected number of donor agencies and governments to integrate gender issues into their activities (Phase I); participating countries included Bangladesh, Chile, Jamaica, Mali, Morocco, Uganda and Viet Nam. The current action-oriented part of the project (Phases II and III) involves pilot studies in five of these countries (Bangladesh, Jamaica, Morocco, Uganda and Viet Nam), the goal of which is to initiate a process of consultation and dialogue between gender researchers, policy makers and activists aimed at making economic and social policies more accountable to women.

This paper focuses on one of the themes that has been extensively explored in the UNRISD/UNDP Occasional Paper Series: the institutionalization of gender concerns within international and national policy machineries. During the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) most member states of the United Nations adopted some form of governmental machinery to ensure that all government activity was monitored for its impact on women. This paper provides case studies of women's policy machinery in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The title derives from the uneasy relationship between feminist bureaucrats (femocrats) and a new generation of decision-makers guided by principles of "economic rationalism" (ecorats). The concern of femocrats for gender equity has come up against the belief of ecorats that public intervention in markets is counter-productive.

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March 1996

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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## Executive Summary

During the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) most member states of the United Nations adopted some form of governmental machinery to advance the status of women. Although there were wide variations in the nature and effectiveness of this machinery, it derived from the feminist insight that, given the different locations of women and men in the workforce and in the family, no government activity was likely to be gender neutral in its effects. For this reason, it was important to go beyond specific “women’s programmes” to ensure that all government activity was monitored for its impact on women.

This paper provides case studies of women’s policy machinery in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, focusing at the national level. It is partly based on interviews conducted over the last decade with people associated with such machinery — whether as bureaucrats, politicians or community activists. The title derives from the uneasy relationship between feminist bureaucrats (femocrats) and a new generation of decision-makers guided by principles of ‘economic rationalism’ (ecorats). The mandated concern of femocrats for gender equity has come up against the belief of ecorats that public intervention in markets is counter-productive.

The author examines the genesis of women’s policy machinery and the specific political traditions and political opportunity structures which favoured its development in the three countries. In the countries concerned there was a historic orientation on the part of social movements towards state action, despite US-influenced anti-state positions adopted by women’s liberation in the early 1970s. The election of governments committed to broadening the policy agenda and fostering citizen participation presented opportunities to translate women’s movement slogans into policy and policy structures. Another enabling factor was a desire on the part of governments to be viewed as good international citizens. This was a significant policy resource for feminists operating both at international and domestic levels, as illustrated in the Canadian case study.

Women’s policy machinery is the daughter of the women’s movement and there is an in-built tension in this relationship. Women’s policy units are accountable to government and not just to the women’s movement, meaning that conflicts of interest and perspective are inevitable. Femocrats must demonstrate loyalty to government in order to be credible in their policy advice; policy brokering involves compromises even if this leads to accusations of co-option. The New Zealand case study suggests that labels such as “liberal feminist” and “radical feminist” may be less relevant than the different structural constraints on feminist action inside and outside government.

Issues examined here include the degree to which femocrats can assist in the resourcing of the women’s movement and the importance of a well-organized women’s movement outside government as an effective political base for feminist policy.

The significance of bureaucratic location is explored in each case study, as is the importance of bureaucratic entrenchment of accountability for gender outcomes. The linkage of gender expertise with bureaucratic clout was

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found to be crucial in the Australian case study, although it meant a trade-off in terms of feminist process. It was hardest to model feminist process at the centre of government where policy co-ordination took place. Such locations also exacerbated the tension perceived by ecorats between the role of providing “objective” policy advice on Cabinet submissions and the “advocacy” role of attempting to ensure equal benefit for women.

In all three cases women’s policy machinery has survived changes of government as well as the increasingly unfavourable environment provided by gender blind economic rationalism. Cross-party support has been garnered for women’s policy machinery despite occasional threats from conservatives to replace it with machinery which will conduct “impact on the family” audits. Strategic changes in discourse have been required which have their own side effects — for example the presentation of childcare or domestic violence as economic issues. There have been intermittent claims that accountability for impact on women can be mainstreamed without expert mechanisms for this purpose. Ultimately, the preservation of equity agendas requires not only routinized accountability mechanisms within government but also strong pressure from outside. It is the combination of women working from inside and outside government which has proved most fruitful — even when it has amounted to achieving least worst outcomes.

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

CAPOW	Coalition of Actively Participating Organisations of Women (Australia)
CEDAW	United Nations Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CRIAW	Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women
EEO	equal employment opportunity
ILO	International Labour Organization
IWY	International Women's Year
MP	Member of Parliament
NAC	National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Canada)
NWCC	National Women's Consultative Council (Australia)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSW	Office of the Status of Women (Australia)
WEL	Women's Electoral Lobby (New Zealand and Australia)

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