Feeding Families in Harris' Ontario: Women, the Tsubouchi Diet and the Politics of Restructuring

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a feminist analysis of the politics of restructuring through a discussion of the so-called "Tsubouchi Diet", an Ontario government document that tried to show that welfare recipients can feed themselves on a mere $90.00 a month. The Tsubouchi Diet is deconstructed to reveal a number of 'impositional claims' about welfare recipients in general, and implicit, gendered assumptions about women as the primary providers of food for families in particular.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé fait une analyse féministe des politiques de la restructuration par l'entremise d'une discussion sur la soi-disant "Tsubouchi Diet", un document du gouvernement ontarien qui a essayé de démontrer que les assistés sociaux pouvaient se nourrir avec seulement 90.00$ par mois. Le Tsubouchi Diet est décomposé afin de révéler un bon nombre de stéréotypes au sujet des assistés sociaux en général, et des hypothèses implicites, basées sur le sexe, particulièrement au sujet des femmes en tant que pourvoyeuses principales de nourriture pour la famille.

INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no better vantage point from which to observe the workings of the New Right than in Mike Harris' Ontario. Since its meteoric rise to power two years ago, the Progressive Conservative government has taken a series of ideologically-based steps to erode the gains that feminists have achieved in the past three decades. Employment equity legislation has been repealed. Funding for women's organizations has been slashed. Working mothers have been blamed for the rise in breakfast programs and single mothers are held responsible for their children's poor performance in schools. The government's economic policies are neo-liberal, in that they aim to restructure the economy in order to maximize the competitiveness of corporate enterprise, while their social policies are blatantly neo-conservative--they harken back to the 1950s when women knew their proper place at the hearth.

With the rise of this New Right agenda in Canada, feminist scholars have begun to highlight the gender subtext of the dominant policy discourse as well as the harmful impacts of recent economic and social policies on Canadian women. At the centre of much of the analysis is the argument that, by operating at the macro level, right-wing social and economic policies take for granted that the costs of restructuring will be absorbed at the micro, or household, level (Brodie, 1995, 1996; Bakker, 1996; Evans, 1996). In that women of all economic classes still hold the primary responsibility for domestic work within households, this translates into the off-loading of state responsibilities for social service onto women, a significant proportion of whom live in poverty. Particularly in the realm of welfare policy, with this assumption comes a variety of normative assertions within the dominant discourse that either cast low income women (and most often sole support women with dependent children) as "the problem" (Brodie, 1996) or that de-genders women by casting all welfare recipients as potential workers, who are, therefore, undeserving of social citizenship rights (Evans, 1996). Another important aspect of the current political discourse that is of interest to

feminist critics is the claim that economic restructuring is inevitable and unstoppable. Because a central aim of restructuring discourse is to keep public attention off the politics of the marketplace, the role of corporate interests in creating and sustaining class divisions has gone practically unnoticed in recent social policy debates. Instead, responses to restructuring have been focused on either the state's or on individual responsibility for affecting change. The potential for consumer protest over rising profits and unfair prices, a tradition with a rich history in the women's movement, seems to have gone relatively untapped.

This paper undertakes a feminist analysis of the politics of restructuring through a discussion of a high-profile event in the province of Ontario: the release of the so-called "Tsubouchi Diet". The Tsubouchi Diet, a government document that attempted to prove that welfare recipients can feed themselves adequately on $90.00 a month, is an important illustration of how restructuring discourse frames public debate and perpetuates hegemonic understandings about the causes of poverty. I use this example to explore the effects of restructuring discourse on low income women through two inter-related issues. First, the Tsubouchi Diet is deconstructed to reveal a number of 'impositional claims' about welfare recipients in general, and implicit, gendered assumptions about women as the primary providers of food for families in particular. Following this, I examine some of the responses to food insecurity that have been advanced by feminists and other social movement groups. I identify three responses observable in the Ontario context: i) "stop the cuts!"; ii) strengthening the food charity system; and iii) community-based food initiatives, and analyze them in light of the restructuring agenda. I then propose a fourth possible response--consumer protest--which draws on a history of women's activism around food prices and the costs of living. In the end, I argue that in order to transcend the problematic dichotomy between state/public responsibility and women's/private responsibility for social well-being, feminists must cast a critical eye on the marketplace and consider the role of transnational corporate food producers in the determination of the costs of food.

"LET THEM EAT TUNA": THE TSUBOUCHI WELFARE DIET

Shortly after their election in May 1995 the Progressive Conservative government of Ontario, under the leadership of Premier Mike Harris, announced a 21.6 per cent decrease in payments to 900,000 residents on social assistance. For a single person, this meant a $143.00 reduction in the maximum monthly welfare cheque (from $663.00 per month down to $520.00), leaving just $195.00 a month for living expenses after rent. For a lone parent with a child under twelve, the monthly maximum went from $1,221.00 to $957.00, leaving $446.00 for expenses other than rent (Mittelstaedt, 1995a).[1]

These cuts provoked substantial public outcry from anti-poverty activists as well as from the New Democratic Party (NDP)--the former government of Ontario and now the third party in the legislature. In response to cries that welfare recipients should not be expected to live on these reduced monthly transfers, the Minister of Community and Social Services, David Tsubouchi, began to issue helpful food shopping tips for people living on a tight budget. For example, in September 1995 the Minister advised welfare recipients to "economize by doing such things as buying tuna in bulk when they [sic] go on sale at 69 cents a tin" (Mittelstaedt, 1995a). He also suggested that people purchase damaged and day-old food, and haggle with merchants over prices. Then on October 21, 1995, Tsubouchi released a shopping list which attempted to prove that a "sole single" person can survive on a food budget of just $90.21 a month (Toughill, 1995).[2] This 'welfare diet', which was compiled by Ministry staff--allegedly with the assistance of an unnamed nutritionist--consists of the bare minimum of grocery items such as canned beans, bologna, rice, and pasta without sauce. By most critical accounts, it does not meet the basic nutritional requirements of the Canada Food Guide and ignores issues of variety, flavour, and cultural appropriateness (Gaad, 1995). It also seems to underestimate the actual costs of food in most grocery stores (Mittelstaedt, 1995b). Apparently,

Tsubouchi also prepared a shopping list for single parents with dependent children on social assistance, but refused to publicize it despite repeated demands by then NDP Leader Bob Rae (Question Period, Ontario Legislative Assembly, televised October 23, 1995).

While the Tsubouchi Diet may not be an official public policy *per se*, I argue that it is a clear expression of the discourse of economic restructuring that drives the Harris government's New Right agenda. It reflects the government's policy stance toward welfare recipients and what they should, and should not, expect from the state. It also serves to reinforce shared understandings about the personal responsibility for poverty which obscure the structural causes. The next section examines three of these shared understandings that are embedded in the Tsubouchi Diet.

IMPOSITIONAL CLAIMS: WHAT THE TSUBOUCHI DIET 'STATES' ABOUT WELFARE RECIPIENTS

Recent feminist analyses of the state have moved away from regarding it as an abstract and monolithic entity that exercises male power over women towards viewing it as a "series of arenas" that is socially constructed and reflects a "plurality of discursive forms" (Pringle and Watson, 1992). With this new approach comes an interest in the particular type of political discourse that reflects and reinforces power relations in society. "Discourse" in this sense necessarily means *the dominant discourse*: discussions about reality that are guided by powerful political and corporate elites (most but not all of whom are white men) in their own interests.

An instrumental part of the dominant discourse is the "impositional claim" which Janine Brodie (1995) defines as an "assertion about reality that [is] self-interested, historically-specific, and thus subject to political contestation" (p. 63). Impositional claims are tools used by the dominant elites, through the societal institutions that they control (e.g. schools, media, marketplace, government), to persuade citizens to consent, often uncritically, to their own domination. This is achieved by creating shared understandings that the status quo works because it is 'natural'. Such a definition resonates with Gramsci's (1971) concept of "common sense" which means "an embedded, uncritical, mainly unconscious set of perceptions and understandings of the world which constitute a 'common' framework in a given era, culture or social space" (in Code, 1991, p. 196).[3] Yet another way to describe impositional claims is as 'normative assertion', a concept which gets at the underlying power dynamics and subtle attempts at moral coercion embedded within them. For example, some of the impositional claims that have been used to create and justify gender and class inequality include the belief that the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family is the backbone of society; the separation of home and workplace (public and private spheres) is beneficial; the single mother 'problem' (a.k.a. the dysfunctional family) has caused an increase in civil disorder; and the individual is responsible for his or her own poverty. These claims not only determine the socially acceptable behaviour of individuals, they also nurture "shared understandings of what it means to be a citizen" (Brodie, 1996, p. 18).

According to Corrigan and Sayer (1985), impositional claims about social relations are enshrined in public policy and are enforced through state regulations and other sanctions. Policy discourse serves to (re)produce political hegemony by defining acceptable forms of individual and collective identity, as well as the boundaries of political discussion, in ways that reinforce the dominant agenda (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Jenson, 1987). For this reason it is important for feminists to deconstruct and critically analyze public policies in order to uncover the impositional claims they express. This may lead the way to the assertion of counter-hegemonic positions and claims. Impositional claims, while powerful, are not fixed and unchanging, rather they are, according to Jane Jenson (1987), political and social constructs that are "determined by ideological conflict" (p. 66). If feminists are to engage in this ideological conflict, therefore, we must be able to identify the discursive forms and normative claims that state policies actually "state" (Brodie, 1995).

By releasing a public document that indicates how much money welfare recipients ought

to spend on food and what types of food they should be satisfied with, the Ontario government has "stated" a number of impositional claims. These claims help to justify the recent cuts to social assistance and reflect the ideologically-driven agenda advanced by the Progressive Conservative government, an agenda that is accepted by the people who voted them into power. I have identified three impositional claims embedded within the Tsubouchi Diet, as follows.

i) *Welfare recipients spend their money unwisely.*

The Minister of Community and Social Services justified his shopping list by claiming that it was meant "to help" welfare recipients prepare food budgets with decreased amounts of money. Premier Harris praised the Minister for being "a caring man who simply wants to provide guidance to people" who depend on the government for their livelihood (Question Period, Ontario Legislative Assembly, televised October 23, 1995). These rationalizations for the Tsubouchi Diet send a clear message to the public that welfare recipients are ill-equipped to budget their meagre funds on their own. It plays on a growing public perception that people on social assistance squander their money--on colour televisions and lottery tickets--and that they are defrauding the hard-working tax payers of Ontario.[4]

This type of impositional claim is central to restructuring discourse in that it holds individuals accountable for their own poverty. In order for the government to realize the neo-liberal goal of minimal intervention in the economy, it has to provide justification for decreasing social services. A principal theme of restructuring is that the state can no longer afford the high price of social programs because of the need to pay off the debt and to become more competitive in the international capitalist economy (Teeple, 1994). Brodie (1995) notes that this is supported by the claim that movement towards globalization is inevitable, related to which is the notion that all that is inefficient will be left behind--in a kind of Darwinian process of natural selection. So, if individuals are left behind, it is their own fault for being noncompetitive; for lacking skills, being lazy, or failing to manage their finances wisely. The Tsubouchi Diet is a clear expression of this discourse in that it reinforces the powerful belief that welfare recipients exacerbate their own poverty by failing to live within their means.

ii) *Welfare recipients will find ways to survive decreases in transfer payments by relying on friends and public charity.*

The Ontario government could not justify its decision to reduce welfare payments if voters thought that hundreds of thousands of people would die of starvation as a result. Thus, a second impositional claim that can be inferred from a reading of the welfare cuts in general, and the Tsubouchi Diet in particular, is that people will be able to survive without government intervention--in other words by relying on their families, friends, and communities to "take up the slack" (Bakker, 199, p. 35). One way that this will occur is that people will work harder to stretch their food budgets and will come together to help those who are hurt by economic insecurity.

The term "re-privatization" is used to describe the "growing consensus among policy-makers that families (whatever their form) should look after their own and that it is up to the neo-liberal state to make sure that they do" (Abbott and Wallace, 1992 quoted in Brodie, 1996, p. 23). As Janine Brodie (1995) argues, by claiming that social services need to be "re-privatized", the implication is that they are being returned to their original and proper sphere. For example, the recent popularity of home care for frail elderly and disabled people and the cuts to child care centres are part of this growing trend. Similarly with respect to the welfare reductions, the assumption of the Harris government is that when times get tough the family or community will do what it is *supposed* to do and take care of those in need. And if that is not enough, then it will be a good incentive for the employable to get out and find work. Again, this can be seen as part of the discourse that assumes personal responsibility for poverty rather than economic or government decisions made at the macro level.

iii) *Because welfare recipients are dependent on social assistance, they do not deserve the right to their choice of food.*

This third impositional claim is part of a

redefinition of citizenship in the neo-liberal, post-Keynsian state. Under the Keynsian welfare state, 'social citizenship' entitled people to a basic standard of living regardless of personal status because it was recognized that structural forces could constrain opportunities and create economic instability. Further, there was a consensus that the state had a responsibility to safeguard the basic well-being of individuals (Teeple, 1995). However with the rise of the neo-liberal state, there has been a marked shift away from this meaning of citizenship toward one that is conditional and exclusive. Political economist Daniel Drache (1992), writes:

> The rights and securities universally guaranteed to citizens of the Keynsian welfare state are no longer rights, universal, or secure. The new ideal of the common good rests on market-oriented values such as self-reliance, efficiency, and competition. The new good citizen is one who recognizes the limits and liabilities of state provision and embraces the obligation to work longer and harder in order to become more self-reliant (in Brodie, 1995, p. 19).

By compiling a shopping list of food that is unappealing and inappropriate for most people, Tsubouchi has sent the message that, because they are not self-reliant or hard working, welfare recipients do not have the right to the kinds of food most people enjoy (read: beggars can't be choosers). The diet implies that people on social assistance should be grateful for whatever they receive and should not expect the luxury items (such as coffee, butter, or spices) that come with being a responsible, employed citizen. A telling example of this view is found in Premier Harris's own legitimization of his Minister's welfare shopping list. When asked if he could live on the Tsubouchi Diet, Harris replied "I have in my younger days,...and I want to tell you I wouldn't want to. That's why I *worked* so hard to try to get ahead, and I would advise people to *try and work a few hours a week to be able to have more than just a survival diet*" (Rusk, 1995, p. A3, my emphasis). The implication here is that all welfare recipients are potential workers and that there are jobs waiting to be filled for those who truly want to work for an honest and respectable living.

By decoding the Tsubouchi Diet in light of an analysis of restructuring discourse, it is possible to recognize it as part of a self-interested, New Right agenda to direct public attention away from government obligation to provide a social safety net towards personal responsibility for poverty and food insecurity. The implicit impositional claims about welfare recipients serve to decrease public sympathy by masking the structural factors that contribute to poverty. There are other factors being obscured in this issue, however. Casting all welfare recipients as potential workers effectively de-genders them and thus overlooks the particular gender implications the cuts to welfare have for women as mothers who have the principle responsibility for feeding families (Evans, 1996).

GENDER SUBTEXT: THE WORK OF FEEDING FAMILIES IN POVERTY

Although the diet released to the media was aimed at the so-called 'sole single', as a public document it clearly expresses the government's perspective toward all welfare recipients, a disproportionate percentage of whom are sole support women with dependent children. Current figures for Canada indicate that 62 per cent of single mothers live below the poverty line (Brodie, 1995) and 40 per cent receive social assistance (Evans, 1996). One recent account suggests that this may work out to as many as 200,000 single mothers raising 400,000 children in the province of Ontario (Monsebraaten, 1995). Many of these households face the realities of food insecurity, which will undoubtedly be intensified by the recent cuts in welfare payments.[5] Therefore, when considering the assumptions behind the Tsubouchi Diet, it is important to consider their specific gender implications--in spite of discursive efforts to obscure them.

Feminists argue that neo-liberal policies take for granted that households will be able to absorb the costs of restructuring and a diminished state role in the provision of basic services to citizens. In Ontario,

the Harris government has inflicted across-the-board cuts to welfare payments and issued a public document that states what welfare recipients should expect to eat. Looking at this through a feminist lens, we can recognize that it will be women, as those primarily responsible for feeding families, who will bear a greater burden of an ostensibly gender-neutral welfare policy. It also appears that the impositional claims embedded in the Tsubouchi Diet are highly contestable when applied to most low income women.

Before proceeding with this argument, however, I want to point out the difficulties involved in conducting this kind of feminist analysis of the work of feeding families in poverty. Not only has the Ontario government de-gendered the issue of food insecurity, but analyses of women's role in feeding families are surprisingly scarce in the feminist and social justice-oriented literature as well. Discussions of women and food seem to focus on stereotypical concerns and, at least in Northern/Western countries, appear to lack a political economy analysis. A telling example of this is that, in a document which addresses policy responses to reducing urban hunger in Ontario, the Toronto Food Policy Council (1994) only mentions women twice: as lactating mothers and as teen-aged girls with eating disorders. More significantly, figures on the incidence of food bank use are readily available as the principle indicators of food insecurity, but these estimates are not broken down by gender.[6] Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank, the province's largest food charity organization, does not keep gender disaggregated statistics on its clientele, although they do collect data on age, occupation, and family status (personal communication with public relations representative of the Daily Bread Food Bank, November 21, 1995). There are statistics which indicate the percentage of household income spent on food by low income people[7] which are often used to support the claim that food insecurity is caused by a lack of material access to affordable, quality, and personally acceptable foods (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994). However these arguments rarely, if ever, say anything about the kind of work involved in translating minimal sums of money into food for households. Food security advocates seem to ignore the fact that access to food means having both a sufficient income and someone to purchase, prepare, and serve the required food.

Similarly, my review of the feminist literature on women and food found that there is a lack of attention to women's work as food producers in the Canadian context. There is a vast amount of research on women as food producers and provisioners in the less developed countries of the South, presumably due to a desire to celebrate women's prominent role in agriculture and subsistence economies (see, for example, Waring, 1988; Shiva, 1989). In the feminist literature on women in English-speaking affluent countries of the North, there is an abundance of studies on white middle class women's battles with body image and eating disorders (see for example Charles and Kerr, 1986; Lawrence (ed.) 1987; Wolf, 1991). This focus probably can be attributed to both the "distancing" [8] of people from their food in industrialized countries as well as the lack of attention feminist researchers have paid to low income women's experience in general. All this is to say that it is difficult to find studies which analyze the gendered nature of feeding work, let alone in the context of economic restructuring.[9]

However, feminist research indicates that women of all classes and ethnicities still carry more responsibility for everyday household maintenance and care-giving than men do (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1994; Armstrong and Armstrong, 1994). While recent time-budget studies which provide numerical estimates for the amount of time women spend on feeding work (provisioning, cooking, and cleaning up after meals) are apparently unavailable, it seems only logical that this task occupies the largest part of women's daily household work: people in North America typically eat three meals a day when time and resources permit.

The few studies that do address women's role in household food-related work support this argument and show that feeding families has been socially constructed as women's work. One recent example is Marjorie DeVault's (1991) ethnographic

study of a socially diverse group of American women entitled *Feeding the Family: the Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Her discussion of feeding as gendered work is framed by an analysis of "discursive prescriptions" about women's responsibility for providing children and partners with satisfying and nutritious meals. These prescriptions are found in the dominant discourse of Anglo-American and European society--in television commercials, women's magazines, and school curricula--and are reinforced through the socialization of females in the private sphere. Through the social construction of "womanliness" and "motherhood", DeVault argues, women come to believe that food production is their duty. Insofar as this is the case for women in Ontario today, it would seem reasonable to conclude that changes in their ability to carry out this set of responsibilities, brought on by a decrease in material resources, will impose a greater burden on them than on those who are the beneficiaries of their domestic work. In light of this analysis, then, we can revisit the impositional claims of the Tsubouchi Diet and provide a counter-hegemonic reading of their meanings.

First, the assumption that welfare recipients are unable to manage their food budgets wisely does not appear to hold up to the experience of most low income women. DeVault's (1991) study, for example, illustrates the vast amount of knowledge women acquire through the experience of feeding families on a minimal income. The women she interviewed demonstrated common survival strategies such as budgeting, 'penny-pinching', coupon use, bargain-hunting, and recipe innovation to create palatable food with few ingredients. Similarly, a pilot study of women's food shopping experiences conducted by nutritionists Sarah Lynch and Mara Galic at the Toronto Department of Public Health (1995), found that low income women are remarkably smart shoppers with highly developed skills for surviving on an unreliable and insufficient food budget. Focus group interviews with a group of women residents of Regent Park (a low income neighbourhood in Toronto) suggested that it is not women's lack of knowledge about how to stretch food dollars that leads to their inability to provide adequate meals, but factors such as location of food stores, costs of transportation, poor quality and high prices of food in neighbourhood convenience stores[10], and simply not having enough money. Further evidence of the care with which low income women manage their food budgets appeared in a recent television news segment on single mothers coping with the welfare cuts in Ontario. The story illustrated the centrality of food budgeting and planning as a survival strategy: it was the most frequently mentioned issue for the two women interviewed (CBC Evening News, Toronto, December 1, 1995). Similarly, low-income women interviewed on CBC's Morningside program (November 26, 1996) had a range of techniques for making ends meet, most of which involved the careful management of their household food budgets. One woman referred to herself as an urban 'hunter-gatherer'.

This type of evidence casts doubt on the dominant assumption that welfare recipients lack the knowledge required to spend money wisely. It also suggests that it is through the skilful planning and hard work of women that low income households are able to put food on their tables. However, Tsubouchi, Harris, and other proponents of the welfare cuts have simply taken this work for granted or chosen not to acknowledge it at all. The Minister's attempt "to help" welfare recipients with their food budgeting assumes not only that they need such assistance, but also that there will be someone in each household who will be able to take on the project of shopping with less money.

Related to this is the second impositional claim, that people will adjust to lower welfare payments by falling back on the support and generosity of neighbours and family members. The problem with this claim is that it fails to acknowledge that *it will be women* who inevitably will bear the brunt of this increased work and corresponding anxiety. My argument is based on the feminist analysis of the "triple role of women" which asserts that, in addition to providing household income (by whatever means) and domestic maintenance, women also bear the disproportionate burden of volunteer work in the community (cf. Moser, 1987). Women, as heads of households and as community workers, will

have to take on a greater amount of care-giving work in order to facilitate the survival of those affected by welfare cuts.

While most low income women do know how to budget, less money to spend on food will create added work for them as providers of food for families. And it is hard work. Shopping for lower prices will involve more time, and hunting for bargains will involve travelling to different stores in a variety of spatially dispersed locations in or out of their neighbourhoods. This is an obstacle for many low income women. For example, the focus group women from Regent Park and South Parkdale expressed difficulties in getting around the city to find the best prices and noted that arranging this often means incurring more costs, such as bus fares and baby-sitting fees (Lynch and Galic, 1995). Cooking less expensive meals, from scratch and without the luxuries of prepared foods, will also be more time and labour intensive.[11]

For mothers, fewer resources will mean an increased challenge to satisfy children's food tastes and nutritional requirements without wasting precious food (Sarah Lynch, Nutritionist, Toronto Department of Public Heath, personal communication, November 23, 1995). For women in poverty, any waste seems very consequential, but it is difficult to control children's eating habits regardless of household income.[12] One of the women interviewed in the CBC news program claimed that she had to put a padlock on her fridge in order to keep her children from sabotaging her carefully planned food rations. Both DeVault (1991) and Hilary Graham (1987) have found that pressures to feed children on an inadequate income often results in mothers going without food or settling for the leftovers. This raises questions about the increased public and media concern for child poverty and malnutrition in recent years. It might be argued that the concern stems from another impositional claim that casts poor parents (read: single mothers) as irresponsible and selfish when the opposite may in fact be true. On this issue, DeVault (1991) argues that government-sponsored nutrition promotion and education policies that target single mothers on welfare serve to increase their stress and feelings of personal failure because they overlook the fact that lack of income, rather than knowledge, is the reason they have difficulty in meeting the dietary needs of their families.[13]

The stress created by pressures of providing food for families on an inadequate budget may lead to increased anxiety and discord within households. This will have negative impacts on low income women in a number of ways, including intensification of parenting problems, decreased ability to carry out job searches, and mental health complications. Further, studies of two parent families have suggested that "conflicts in lower-class households may, on occasion, revolve around food" (McIntosh and Zey, 1989, p. 322). These studies may suggest the risk of increased violence toward women in their own homes brought on by the stresses of poverty and hunger.

Moreover, DeVault (1991) notes that the kind of care-giving work performed by low income women (particularly those from racialized groups) has often been seen as "an essential contribution to communities under siege by the wider society" (p. 195). In communities where extended families are common and complex social ties are necessary, women may bear the responsibility of feeding more than just their immediate family members. Further, through their volunteer work in the community, women make up the driving force behind local charities, such as food banks, soup kitchens, and meals-on-wheels, that help other families in time of need. This community work has been theorized in reference to women's "community consciousness" which has been a significant force in urban social change (Cott, 1989; Wekerle, 1996). I was unable, however, to obtain contemporary figures that measure women's community feeding work--such as the percentage of food charity workers who are women or the numbers of women who participate in collective kitchens or gardens in Ontario. Conveniently, all of this work has been made invisible, at the same time that it has been taken for granted as 'natural', in restructuring discourse.

With regard to the third impositional claim, that welfare recipients are undeserving of the citizenship rights extended to hard-working people, a feminist analysis necessarily counters with a

discussion of the devaluation of women's care-giving work and its real contribution to society. Feminist economists like Isabella Bakker (1996) and Marilyn Waring (1988) have exposed the inherent male bias in economic theories that define 'work' as only that which is productive to the economy and measurable in monetary terms. This means that the unpaid labour involved in maintaining households and community support networks is not recognized as work. In the context of welfare policy, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994) write, "it is increasingly claimed that 'welfare mothers ought to work', a usage that tacitly defines work as wage-earning and child-raising as non-work" (p. 19). In addition, single mothers on welfare are often blamed for their own dependency because they have made the mistake of having children 'out of wedlock'--which goes against the moral prescriptions of the right-wing social agenda. As a result of the devaluation of care-giving and the pathologization of single mothers, women who spend a significant part of their days providing for the basic necessities for their families are not 'working' and therefore do not deserve the rights accorded to those that do. In the case of the Tsubouchi Diet, women on welfare are not entitled to the kinds of food that are enjoyed by employed members of society.

Fraser and Gordon (1994) argue that it is illogical that women who do not earn an income are labelled in the dominant discourse as "dependents" who are getting money for nothing (and their checks for free) because they are responsible for the well-being of children and other *dependents* (see also Baines, Evans, and Neysmith, 1992; Brodie, 1995). While valorizing or assigning dollar values to women's caring is a controversial issue for feminists, most agree that as work, it must be recognized for its contribution to individual, family, and community survival. This would necessitate a redefinition of dependency and greater acknowledgment of the value of interdependency, in order to challenge the impositional claim that women on welfare do not deserve social citizenship rights (Fraser and Gordon, 1994).

The underlying assumptions of the Tsubouchi Diet are clear expressions of the Harris government's policy stance toward welfare recipients in the province of Ontario. What should be of primary significance to feminists is that these assumptions have particular gender implications that are certain to reinforce the multi-layered oppression of low income women. Women on social assistance do not need to be taught how to budget or how to feed their families, yet the government has directly "stated" its view that such "help" is a more appropriate answer to the problem of food insecurity than addressing the structural issues of social and economic inequality. The fact that public discussions of food insecurity have not included an analysis of feeding as gendered work should be cause for concern under these circumstances. It seems that feminists need to challenge the neo-liberal impositional claim that the costs of cutting back the social safety net will be absorbed by the private sphere with a more thorough accounting of the care-giving work this will create for low income women.

RESPONSES TO THE TSUBOUCHI DIET: REDUCING FOOD INSECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF RESTRUCTURING

Shifting attention slightly, another important example of the way in which self-interested impositional claims have been used to define the "boundaries of political discussion" (Jenson, 1987) can be found in an examination of the different types of responses the Tsubouchi Diet has elicited from social movement groups in Ontario. Janine Brodie (1995) suggests that "feminists have tended to focus on...the 'falling apart' without exploring how the 'building up again' is proceeding unabated, often in the most subtle and seemingly innocent ways" (p. 21; quoting Soja, 1989). By this she means, it seems to me, that feminists have not paid enough attention to the ways in which the state is being restructured nor to the hidden messages in policy that help to manufacture public consent for the process.[14] While I agree with this, I would argue that as part of any analysis of "the building up again", feminists also should look at the types of responses to restructuring advocated by counter-hegemonic groups in society. By examining the responses of social movement groups, we can see how the universe of political

discourse has shaped the framework for action and the difficulties this presents for the project of social transformation (Jenson, 1987). In this section, then, I identify briefly three types of responses to food insecurity that have been advanced by social justice groups, and provide a brief discussion of each in light of the New Right policy agenda that exists in Ontario today.

i) *"Stop the Cuts!"*

Since the Harris government was elected and started to deliver on its promises to cut social spending, there has been a marked increase in the amount of social protest in the province of Ontario. Many left-wing social justice coalitions (e.g. Action Canada Network, Metro [Toronto] Network for Social Justice, Anti-Poverty Coalition) have organized rallies to demonstrate their anger over the reduction of welfare payments (Klein, 1995, p.5). When the Tsubouchi Diet was released, the most common response put forward by critics involved demands for the "restoration of social assistance money" so that people could purchase a more reasonable amount of appropriate food (Gadd, 1995, p. A10).

While demands to "stop the cuts" seem to be an understandable response to fears in a crisis situation, it is paradoxical that social justice groups, many of which are part of the women's movement, are now in the position to defend a system that most people previously thought to be flawed. This resonates with Brodie's (1996) discussion of "nostalgic welfarism": an "approach [that] glorifies the postwar welfare state and reads any deviation from past experience as undesirable, disregarding that the welfare state also had negative consequences for women and other disadvantaged groups" (p.9).

Brodie (1996) goes on to show that this poses a particular dilemma for feminists. On one side of the issue, feminists have argued that welfare institutionalizes the feminization of poverty and as such is not a system to be defended. As Fraser and Gordon (1994) argue, "We are reminded, often by welfare recipients themselves that the existing conditions of claiming [welfare] are wretched and damaging...[they] reduce self-esteem and autonomy" (p. 23). On the other side, it has been argued that welfare is necessary for many women's survival and for keeping some women economically independent of men. Carol Brown (1981) describes this paradox well: "If to eliminate or reduce welfare is to bolster 'private patriarchy', then simply to defend it is to consolidate 'public patriarchy'" (quoted in Fraser, 1987, p. 89). It seems that debates over welfare and dependency pose dilemmas for people who seek social equity because they have been shaped in the neo-liberal discourse as a choice between *either* state responsibility *or* individual responsibility. In that there exists neither an adequate infrastructure to allow people to survive through individual or collective initiatives nor many employment opportunities that will provide a living wage, this does not amount to much of a choice.

ii) *Strengthening the Food Charity System*

In times of economic crisis, people have relied on food charity in order to supplement their insufficient incomes. Food banks have been the primary response to hunger in Canada since the early 1980s (Davis and Tarasuk, 1994; Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994). With the recent cuts to welfare, out of which has emerged the Tsubouchi Diet, the demand on food charities such as food banks will undoubtedly increase. This is evidenced by the finding that Foodshare's Hunger Hotline, a service that helps people gain access to food banks, has experienced a marked increase in calls since the cuts came into effect (Field, 1995).[15] In response to this increase in food insecurity, many social justice advocates maintain that food banks are an essential support system within the social safety net, the existence of which is particularly crucial in times of crisis (Jack, 1991). For example, many activist groups in my neighbourhood and at my university have stepped up their food bank drives in order to help meet the increased need created by the recent welfare cuts.

But food banks, for all their immediate relief to hungry people, play right into the hands of the neo-liberal agenda. For one reason, they fit nicely into the goals of reprivatization advanced by advocates of the minimalist state. Simply stated, by supporting the

continued existence of a food charity system, proponents are helping to keep pressure off the government. They contribute to the growing perception that social problems can be solved by the non-profit and voluntary sectors. Food charity also helps to perpetuate impositional claims about poor people by forcing them to accept hand-outs of substandard food from their neighbours.

Letting the government off the hook is not the only way that food banks ease the process of economic restructuring. As Barb Davis and Valerie Tarasuk (1994) note, food corporations directly benefit from the existence of food banks. For instance, food corporations willingly donate up to 70 per cent of food bank stock because they see it as an efficient way to unload surplus or damaged items without having to pay for their disposal (Winson, 1993:183; Kneen, 1993:177). In the process, food corporations are able to gain a reputation as good "corporate citizens" that are more deserving of citizenship rights than ordinary individuals.[16] This clearly masks the contribution of big food businesses to the problem of hunger in the first place and helps to further the neo-liberal notion that the market is apolitical (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994:8).

iii) *Community-based food initiatives*

As a response to the growing incidence of food insecurity, many communities have begun to organize local self-help food security initiatives such as collective kitchens, food co-ops and community gardens (Guberman, 1995; Wekerle, 1996). These projects aim to alleviate the problem of hunger without relying on the government or food charity system. They also may have the potential to address feminist concerns about the double burden of women by collectivizing a central aspect of domestic work (Hayden, 1982). With the release of the Tsubouchi Diet, community-based food initiatives are being promoted more vigorously as a viable, long-term response to chronic hunger and poverty (Sarah Lynch, personal communication, November 23, 1995).

While this approach seems to reflect a communitarian trend toward increased self-reliance and mutual aid, as with the other two examples, it presents a difficult dilemma in the context of restructuring. On the one hand, we might argue that a potential for mutual aid is an inherent characteristic of human society that has been thwarted by the individualistic ideology and social welfare system in Western societies (cf. Kropotkin, 1914). By this logic there may be cause to celebrate the return to community-shared food production as a positive, unintended consequence of economic restructuring. Indeed, compared to the first two responses, this alternative seems to me to be the most promising.

On the other hand, however, self-help initiatives also may play into the reprivatization agenda which seeks to off-load government responsibility for the well-being of citizens onto the voluntary sector--or most probably women: "an unequal gender order *ensures* this outcome" (Brodie, 1995, p. 63, my emphasis). In a similar vein, Davis and Tarasuk (1994) warn that while collective food initiatives may have important benefits for those who participate in them, "the impact of such programs on hunger must be severely limited without efforts to address the structural roots of the problem" (p. 55) [17] Indeed, it seems that social movement groups are in a no-win situation when it comes to finding alternative solutions to the problems created by economic restructuring.

NEED OR GREED?: FOOD IS A BIG BUSINESS

What are the structural roots of food insecurity that are not being addressed in these responses? While the answers to this question could form the content of another paper, it seems that most of these responses overlook the market sphere and the role of multi-national food corporations in the creation and maintenance of hunger in Canada. This may be due to the success of restructuring discourse to frame the debate around state versus the individual or community dichotomy and depoliticize our understandings of the relations of global capitalism.

In reality, the food distribution industry is a highly political arena. In his book *The Intimate Commodity*, Anthony Winson (1993) documents the growth and concentration of the agri-food industry in

Canada. Although Canadians have low food prices compared to many other counties, the food retail industry is characterized by a corporate oligarchy, centralized control of food distribution, and massive profits. For example, Winson (1993) reports that in 1987, "the largest five grocery distributors in Canada accounted for about 70 per cent of all sales" (p. 165). This is about eight times the highest acceptable level of corporate concentration in the United States. The lack of consumer choice is a product of this oligarchic situation, as is the higher price of food relative to the US: "the higher the concentration the higher the prices tend to be" (Winson, 1993, p. 166). A recent report in *The Canadian Grocer* (February 1994) indicates that the grocery industry hit a high point in 1993 at over $43 billion in sales - projected to rise to almost $50 billion in 1994. Kneen (1993) quotes the annual sales for the Canadian-owned, transnational George Weston Ltd. food empire at $9.2 billion in 1992. Figures on profits are difficult to obtain, but a 1993 *Report on Business Magazine* article estimated that "the average shopkeeper in the top 100 [of the planet's retail food chains--four of which are Canadian-owned] boasts...profit of $240 million" a year (quoted in Kneen, 1993, p. 55).

While Canadian food prices have not increased as dramatically as they have in other countries undergoing structural adjustment, and arguably are not as significant as rising rents, when we look at the percentage of prices that is made up of value-added costs, it becomes obvious that food retail businesses are not operating with a concern for the diminished living conditions of their customers. For instance, Winson (1993) reports that the practice of "promotional allowances" (such as paying supermarkets for prime shelf space) adds 10 to 15 per cent to grocery costs in Canada. These and other hidden costs of the food business attest to the fact that consumers are being manipulated to consent to the prices they pay, the lack of choice in the items they buy, and the manner in which their food is sold to them. Winson (1993) describes this situation clearly when he writes:

> We are told that we pay less on a per capita basis than most other societies for the food we eat, and yet this food is still too expensive for growing numbers of our citizens. We have little say in how our food is marketed to us, and although few would deny that it is pleasant to shop in the almost palatial surroundings of our largest supermarkets, only fools would believe that these surroundings are not somehow reflected in the price we pay for our sustenance... By alienating this business to an extraordinary few "merchant princes", we have excluded the possibility of providing broader access to the mainstream food-distribution system (p. 183).

It seems that these "merchant princes" have been remarkably effective in convincing consumers that they are providing good service and wholesome produce at competitive prices, and in passing themselves off as good corporate citizens. Some of the strategies they have used include: adding child seats to shopping carts, introducing so-called environmentally-friendly products, creating no-frills/no-name product lines to please the frugal shopper, and conducting food bank drives so that shoppers can donate bags of groceries (purchased in the store) to charity. All of these seemingly progressive "perks" no doubt pass the higher hidden prices of doing business on to consumers.

In light of this situation, it is interesting that critics of the cuts to social welfare have paid more attention to the government than to the marketplace. Why have most people expressed their disgust for the Tsubouchi Diet at Queen's Park but not in front of Loblaws? Why is Galen Weston, owner of one of the largest corporate food empires in Canada, laughing all the way to the bank?[18]

BRING BACK THE BREAD RIOT: WOMEN AND CONSUMER PROTEST

These questions are relevant to a feminist analysis of restructuring because they illustrate Janine Brodie's (1995) insightful claim that we have allowed the dominant discourse, with its claims of market neutrality, to define our actions and responses to the

situation. Most of us have not considered the possibility of directing our struggles toward the marketplace. In this respect it may be useful to reclaim the fact that consumer protest has a long tradition within women's movements in other parts of the world and at different times in history.[19] Women in less developed countries, most notably in Latin America, have been the leaders of successful campaigns to fight against rising rents and food prices brought on by inflationary structural adjustment policies (see for example Daines and Seddon, 1994; Elson, 1992; Kaplan, 1990). In North American cities, Dana Frank (1985) documents the experiences of Jewish working-class women in New York City in the early 1900s who organized food riots and cost-of-living protests in response to wartime economic policies. Similarly, Annelise Orleck (1993) writes of radical housewives' uprisings in major American cities during the Great Depression. Closer to home, Wayne Roberts (1976) describes the experience of Jewish women in Toronto who boycotted their city's kosher butchers in 1908 and 1914.[20] The women involved in this form of community activism often expressed moral arguments about the rights of mothers to feed their families adequate meals. Their consumer protests emerged out of their everyday struggles with food insecurity and the increased amount of work that was required to feed families on a reduced budget. Frank (1985) writes:

> Not only did price translate wages into goods and services, but also price levels determines these women's working conditions. High prices made women's work harder. Scouring the streets for bargains, overhauling menus, satisfying finicky family members, planning to the last penny--all these consequences of rising prices could multiply a housewife's work immensely. Food price protests were these women's way of organizing at their own workplace, as workers whose occupation was shopping, preparing food, and keeping their families content (p. 282-3).

Perhaps feminists should heed Brodie's (1995) warning that oppositional movements must not "ignore or deny the shifting political terrain of gender and public policy [or] fail to explore their own historical origins and potential for transformation [or they may be] destined to become part of the history they cling to" (p. 80). It is important to know about this history of women's activism not only to challenge the perception that women are passive victims of unfair state policies, but also to understand the different responses women have had to economic crises. These examples also remind us of the power women have had as primary consumers of food for households over decisions in the market. In the present economic context, however, we seem to have been convinced that the market is untouchable and impervious to consumer protest (or even that it is doing a job of providing for our needs). That consumer protests have not occupied a prominent place in Canadian women's contemporary struggles against the impact of restructuring attests to existence of a shared understanding that economic forces are beyond our control.

CONCLUSION

By questioning the terms in which social problems are named, we expand the collective capacity to imagine solutions (Fraser and Gordon, 1994, p. 6).

As I have tried to show by decoding the Tsubouchi Diet, powerful impositional claims about social reality have so far succeeded in shaping public policy as well as public responses to policy decisions. Feminist analyses such as this are important in that they allow us to understand how women's socially constructed roles have been built into the restructuring agenda and how they are taken for granted by policy-makers. Although they seem to be having devastating effects on low income women, it is important to remember that the underlying assumptions of the Harris government's Common Sense Revolution are political constructs that are "subject to political contestation" (Brodie, 1995, p. 27). Unfortunately, feminists are faced with the need to find ways of engaging in this ideological conflict

at a time when our financial resources and political credibility are in jeopardy.[21]

In light of this, it is useful to consider Brodie's (1995) caveat that feminists must be careful not to accept uncritically the impositional claim that economic restructuring is inevitable. Focusing all of our attention on governments and social polices is problematic if it means that we fail to analyze the complex interrelationship between the state and the marketplace. Decisions made in the market have as much, if not more, impact on women's lives as those made by elected officials. Women's history has shown that, as the principal consumers for households, women hold incredible power to bring about changes in corporate behavior. This untapped potential should be investigated as a viable way to transcend the public/private dualism that has limited our ability to respond effectively to the pressures of cuts to social assistance. It is important to consider new ways to place pressure on the corporate arena through forms of women's activism, as they may offer greater potential for success than engagement with an ideologically motivated government that seems determined to carry out the project of restructuring at the expense of the women of Ontario.

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ENDNOTES

1. It is worth noting that the Ontario government has since repealed rent control legislation.

2. The pioneers in the study of poverty--Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree--both resorted to trying to estimate how little an individual or family could live on in their efforts to define 'poverty'. Rowntree devised quite complex measures to establish the 'minimum necessary expenditure for the maintenance of merely physical health', i.e. bare subsistence levels, including detailed food expenditures (Rowntree, 1902, 86-87) While these lists of necessary food stuffs are almost as dreary as Tsubouchi's, ironically, 'Rowntree's attempt to produce a subsistence definition of poverty resulted in income levels substantially above that obtained in reality by many working class families' in York at the time, (Field, 1981, 38), but then, Rowntree was clearly in sympathy with the plight of the poor.

3. In this respect, it is quite ironic that the Harris government was elected on the campaign promise to bring about a "Common Sense Revolution".

4. It is commonly suggested that the Conservative government was elected by disgruntled middle class voters who believe that their taxes are being used to keep lazy people living a comfortable lifestyle that they do not deserve. Harris's promises to cut welfare, introduce workfare, and reduce income taxes by 30 per cent, seem to have been the deciding factors in the 1995 Ontario provincial election.

5. According to Graham Brown, co-ordinator of the Foodshare Hunger Hotline in Metropolitan Toronto, women made up approximately two thirds of the callers in the July - October 1995 period. He estimated that a significant proportion of these women callers were sole support parents with young children (personal communication, December 7, 1995).

6. In 1992, 2.1 million people sought help from food banks (Davis and Tarasuk, 1994). Ontario food banks assist over 250,000 each month (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994).

7. Food consumed in low income households accounts for about 30 per cent of disposable income (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994).

8. Brewster Kneen (1993) uses the term "distancing" to describe the processes through which people in Western/Northern countries are separated and alienated (physically as well as emotionally) from the sources of their food.

9. Notable exceptions that do look at household food consumption and provisioning from a feminist perspective include Morris (1990) and Brannen and Wilson (eds.) (1987). These studies are based in the UK.

10. This is supported in Statistics Canada's Family Food Expenditure report (1992), which indicates that the lower the income level, the higher amount of money spent on food in convenience stores.

11. It might be speculated that preparing inexpensive meals may actually cost more in the long run, if we include the cost of energy required to cook foods from scratch and the food waste that results from the absence of preservatives in home-made foods or from buying sale items in bulk quantities.

12. The prevalence of food marketing campaigns that target young children--with little or no concern for their socio-economic status or cultural identity--is particularly relevant in this regard.

13. This resonates with the feminist critique of 19th century Progressive Era reformers who tried to impose Anglo-European middle class morality and domesticity on working class immigrant women through state-sponsored public health programs (cf. Hayden, 1982).

14. I have borrowed the concept of "manufacturing consent" from Noam Chomsky (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

15. As another telling indication the extent of the crisis, Debbie Field, the executive director of Foodshare, reports that in addition to an increase in the number of calls, "we have already seen a marked increase [in] callers who are in despair and even who talk of suicide" (1995:2).

16. In December 1996, Premier Harris launched a school breakfast program sponsored by Post Cereals. It is worth noting that during the press conference he commented that children in the 1990s need such programs because moms no longer stay home and cook a hot breakfast in the morning.

17. To this point I would add my own observation that many community food initiatives, such as community kitchens, are organized and funded by social service agencies (e.g. public health departments) rather than the participants themselves. This may limit the extent to which such projects can challenge "the system" or empower the participants to gain control over their lives and their communities.

18. I can't resist noting here that Galen's wife Hilary Weston was appointed Lieutenant Governor of Ontario in January 1997.

19. For example, Edward Thompson (1963) says "in urban and rural communities alike, a consumer consciousness preceded other forms of political or industrial antagonism. Not wages but the cost of bread, was the most sensitive indicator of popular discontent"(67). Women were often at the forefront of these demonstrations as in 1795 in Nottingham where "Women went from one baker's shop to another, set their own price on the stock therein, and putting down the money, took it away". Interestingly, this same strategy was employed by women in Milan in the early 1970s (dalla Costa, 1972). While Hobsbawn argues that 'simple food riots' were dying out by the 19th century, to be replaced by the organized working class, they were a crucial factor in the French Revolution, as documented by George Rude (1959).

20. Frank (1985) suggests that there is cultural explanation for these campaigns, namely a "Jewish tradition of women's activism, and consumer protest in particular" that was transplanted to North America from Europe (p.264).

21. Here I am referring to the New Right's dismissal of feminists as a special interest group and the deep cuts in funding for women's groups by all three levels of government in Canada.

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