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INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Wendy McKeen talks with Jennifer A. Stephen

Wendy McKeen, York University, conducts research in the area of welfare state restructuring and the feminist voice in social policy debates. Her latest book, *Money in Their Own Name: The Feminist Voice in Poverty Debate in Canada, 1970-1995*, published by University of Toronto Press in 2004, has been awarded the 2006 CWSA/ACEF Annual Book Prize.
Jennifer Stephen, York University, is the author of *'Pick one intelligent girl': Employability, Domesticity and the Gendering of Canada's Welfare State, 1939-1947*. University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Jennifer Stephen
To begin, I would like to congratulate you on your timely and thought-provoking study. What drew you to examine the role of feminist organisations in the poverty debates of the period, 1970-1995?

Wendy McKeen
I am pleased and honoured to have been given this award! This time period incorporated a major struggle over social policy and over the future shape of the Canadian welfare state, beginning with a public focus on the issue of poverty and inequality in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s under the Pearson and Trudeau Liberals and continuing through the emergence and consolidation of a neo-liberal approach to social policy that took place under the Mulroney Conservatives and Chrétien and Martin Liberals in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Over this period we saw a major transformation in the basic understanding of state responsibility for the welfare of citizens, with the social liberal belief in the principle of *social* responsibility being replaced with the neo-liberal notion that responsibility for human welfare rests solely with the individual and her/his ability to access the market and private charity. Women, of course, had, and still have, a lot at stake in these issues – not just as needy individuals, but in terms of how women are defined as citizens – the kinds of rights they have, the kinds of social relationships that are encouraged, and the conditions under which these take place. My own interest was in the political dynamics of these welfare state changes and the role that feminist organizations played over this critical period of change. Women's groups had played a role in the debates and struggles throughout the period, beginning with the first stirrings of the second wave women's movement that followed in

the wake of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. As a researcher with the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) in the early/mid-1980s, I was also privy to some of this activity. My job at that time was to research and prepare briefs, speeches, and so on, in response to the social policy changes being advanced by the Mulroney government – and at that time, child and family benefits was a major focus for this government. The question I was drawn to, then, was in what ways did the actions of key women's organizations (like the CACSW) count in the social policy realm, particularly with respect to the field of child and family benefits? How successful had they been in resisting the neo-liberal onslaught, and in what ways did their choices (over strategies, discourses, policy reforms) possibly play into the emergence and solidification of the neo-liberal paradigm? I was also interested in finding out what more meaningful alternatives to neo-liberalism had perhaps been lost in the process of the debates and struggles. My overall objective was to present an understanding of social policy change in Canada that took into account the influences emanating from both macro level and meso level sources, and the voices of both dominant and more marginalized actors, including women's movement organizations. From my own experience I knew that feminist actors did not work in a vacuum but within a meso or policy community context that also included other organizations seeking to have a progressive impact on social policy. I wanted to position the choice-making activity of feminists within this realm of influence and to pay particular attention to the way that the particular constructions of the issues and discourses on poverty served to both open and limit the realm of the possible for feminist actors.

Jennifer Stephen
The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and CACSW struggled to influence critical policy debates underway throughout the period that has seen the most significant restructuring of the post-WWII welfare state in Canada. You suggest that "the institutionalized women's movement opted to support rather than challenge the Tory agenda on family and child benefits policy". (66) What challenges did the institutionalized women's movement confront during the period, within its own ranks and among its traditional allies, that may account for this strategic decision?

Wendy McKeen
The Tories came to power in the mid-1980s with an agenda of transforming child and family benefits programs (a field that was made up of three programs: the child tax credit, the family allowance, and the child tax exemption). Their aim was to shift the meaning and impact of this set of programs - from one that supported *all* families on the basis of serving the principles of horizontal equity and universality to one that was merely targeted to *poor* or *low income* families. The family allowance was the one universal program amongst them, and it best reflected the ideals of horizontal equity and universal entitlement – it gave to all families with children no matter what their income, and, with a progressive tax system in place, it ensured a redistribution of income from relatively well-off families to those who were less well-off. The allowance also had a particular meaning for women because it was often the only money that many women received in their own name . This was important as it gave them a sense of hope about being able to act independently, and especially to act in the interest of themselves and their children by leaving a bad or abusive relationship. It also had an important symbolic meaning in conveying the notion that the unpaid work

women did at home in raising children was *socially* significant and should be recognized as such.

There was a critical moment, however, when key women's groups had to make a decision about whether to defend the family allowance or to go along with the Tory plan of a greater targetin g for family benefits programs. They opted for the latter. To understand this decision we have to place it within the context of the prevailing conditions. The Mulroney Conservative government had come to power in 1984 with a neo-conservative agenda of deficit reduction (which meant cutting social programs) and private sector growth. Progressive social policy organizations (the National Council of Welfare, the Canadian Council on Social Development and the National Anti-Poverty Organization) were convinced of the need to form a coalition (the Social Policy Reform Group) in order to be an effective opposition to the Tories. Key women's organizations (the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women) were seen as useful partners and became part of the coalition. The bottom line for the Tories was the absolute refusal to increase child benefits, despite the clear evidence of increasing poverty among families. After deliberating the options, the members of SPRG decided that the priority should be on the goal of enhancing vertical equity, and with no new money assigned, they felt that the poorest should have first call on the benefits, and they felt this could be achieved through a more targeted program of child benefits.

To understand why women's groups went along with this decision we have to look at the particular pressures they faced at the time, from both their allies within the SPRG and others within the broader women's movement. At least three issues were significant. First, the social policy organizations involved were established as experts on social policy and, with considerable resources to dedicate to producing policy proposals, were more influential in this decision-making context. SPRG had come to believe that vertical equity was the one crucial progressive goal that should be pursued. Second, the individuals representing women's groups had gained the impression that principles like universality and women's independent entitlement to benefits were no longer as important to women as they had been. Key organizations such as CACSW and NAC had begun to feel pressures from within the women' s movement to shift attention away from struggles around particular social programs in order to address broader issues and debates stemming from major social and economic upheavals that were taking place - for example, to address questions of racism and interrelations of racism, sexism and classism, and to focus on broader employment-related concerns such as the devastation to women's jobs brought about by the free trade agreement, and the devolution of responsibility for social programs from the federal to provincial governments. Third, (and related to the first point), with respect to the issue of the family allowance and the issue of individual versus family-based entitlement, some of the male analysts within SPRG were quite opposed to the idea of individual entitlement. It simply did not fit with their concept of vertical equity which was perceived as having to be based on the *family* unit. Within this context feminists began to feel that defending the family allowance was simply "unrealistic".

I argue in the book that this event was one moment among many in the growing success

of neo-liberalism as the new model for Canadian social policy. In the field of child or family benefits, neo-liberalism brought the successful elimination of the principles of universality, of social responsibility, and the adoption of the norm of limited social supports to families, primarily targeted to the "deserving" needy. With respect to women's voice, the decision to diminish, and then eliminate completely, the family allowance was not what women's organizations wanted at all. Many grassroots women's groups and individual women expressed much anger and disappointment when the allowance was finally eliminated in 1992. By then, however, the poverty issue had been recast as an issue of "child poverty." As governments were no longer as willing to fund women's organizations, women's concerns were barely audible in the public debate over child benefits.

Jennifer Stephen
Money in their Own Name contributes to a growing literature that examines the gendered contours of welfare state policies. A key dimension in this literature concerns the gendering of caring labour, at the same time as the ' ideal typical' citizen is recognized only in relation to her/his labour market status. Relations of class and race have historically intensified the burden of reproductive labour and care work. When doing the research for this book, did you come across any discussion about the racialized and class-based dimensions of social policy reform, specifically in the context of the poverty debate and those likely to be most affected by its outcome?

Wendy McKeen
It was the concept of poverty, and not care, that has had resonance in the Canadian political context. While there was some explicit focus on race and class in the early discussions of poverty in the mid-1960s and early 1970s (reflecting the presence of both race politics and neo-Marxist voices at the time), it is important to recognize that issues of class and race issues were always implied within the discourses of the political focus on poverty by the progressive social policy community in Canada. In effect, this community made a significant contribution to imprinting issues of poverty, inequality and social injustice on the public agenda in Canada, albeit, with a social-liberal political bent. The "rediscovery of poverty" in the 1960s reflected a turn towards a social-liberal doctrine that viewed poverty and inequality as *structural* features of Canadian society; the poor began to be portrayed as innocent victims of larger structures that were beyond their control. These discussions played into a new vision of what it meant to be Canadian; Canadians were presented as people who *cared* about issues of justice and equity. The ongoing thrust of organizations like the Canadian Council on Social Development, the National Council of Welfare, the National Anti-Poverty organization, and others, has been to support and promote these ideals. One of the main ways they have kept such ideals in public view, as I describe in the book, was by describing and documenting the poverty and disadvantage faced by many groups within society, and their poverty was often positioned as relating to class, race, gender, disability, age, family type, and so on. Certain groups (for example, women, First Nations people, racially marginalized populations, new immigrants and refugees, single parents, the elderly, and people with disabilities) were seen as suffering double, triple, or quadruple disadvantage as a result of this positioning and the way it impacted upon their ability to access good employment and incomes. The solution sought was stronger and more generous income security policies and social services, in order to

create a more level playing field in Canadian society, address the needs of the most disadvantaged through specific policies designed to redress historical disadvantages, specifically by eliminating structures and attitudes that reproduced inequality.

This was an important and valuable contribution, and we can appreciate it all the more in the light of the recent changes in which structural perspectives are being replaced with assumptions that social problems are caused by the inadequacies and failures of individuals. Nevertheless, there were important limitations in the social-liberal discourse of this community.

Jennifer Stephen
Your book explores the doubled feminist vision of social policy. On the one hand, a liberal, equal opportunity feminism that has accepted targeting of benefits to those deemed most in need, a vision that traces historical continuities with the maternal feminism of an earlier period. On the other hand, you describe a more radical feminist vision of social individualism, through which women would truly be accorded "money in their own name" as beneficiaries of social policy entitlements. Given that the social policy community has historically tended to gravitate between dual polarities, positioning women as either workers-who-mother or mothers-who-work, how do you think that a feminist vision of social individualism might break this impasse?

Wendy McKeen
I see the concept of social individualism as providing an important alternative vision for social policy that could provide a way out of the impasse for women that you describe. Underlying the problem of women's social invisibility and inequality is a dominant assumption about human existence, which is that we are all "possessive individuals" (i.e. possessing certain rights, such as the right to privacy, to association, etc.). This notion, however, is modeled after the male norm of the full time (breadwinner) worker who is not seen to have any other responsibilities. Feminists have pointed out the fallacy of this model in not recognizing the ways even male breadwinners are dependent (not the least, on the unpaid care work of their wives or partners), and the way it consigns women to two untenable options. Women either have to try to gain social recognition through the claim that they are just *like men* (but this inevitably fails women because it tends to ignore their mothering role), or through the claim that (as mothers) they are *different* from men (but this inevitably fails them in not recognizing their needs as workers). Feminist theorists argue that dependency is simply part of the human condition, and that we should restructure our lives and societies in ways that account for this, and, indeed, in ways that assume and reflect the way that we are all interdependent.

These ideas are captured in the term, "social individual," (borrowed from Celia Winkler, although the ideas are developed by others as well). Winkler's argument is that in democratic society we all need care, and to give care, at various times in our life, we all need material resources (usually by earning money), and we all need to have a meaningful voice in society and in the policies and structures that affect our lives. Equality depends upon these universals being reflected in concrete ways in our social structures and policies, and to have these elements acknowledged as interrelated and inextricably

intertwined as we go about our day to day lives. Winkler argues that it is the life of the single mother that best shows these interrelationships and where the tensions currently exist, and so it is her life that best serves as a useful model in terms of thinking through appropriate policies and social supports. The social-individual concept also implies the need for social structures based on the values and concepts of social responsibility, of social solidarity, of community, of building a sense of belonging, of building a society that cares about the welfare of others, and of measures to counter structures and ideologies supporting and promoting social injustice, racism, sexism, and other kinds of inequitable social relations.

I argue in the book that this was the kind of model that Canadian feminists were pushing for in the 1970s – and it underlay their campaign to get individual entitlement to benefits for women. Their goal was to modify the existing social policy system in ways that would help make visible women's individuality within the family, and more importantly, help make visible and value their unpaid care work in the home. It also assumed a social policy system that provided for universal or broad-based social entitlements based on the principles of interdependence, *social* responsibility, and social solidarity.

I think that the ideal of social individualism still provides an important alternative standpoint for critical gendered analysis of social policies and for thinking about alternative policies and social arrangements. Social individualism could be an important concept in a broader struggle that brings together a range of other critical struggles including those of other marginalized groups.

Jennifer Stephen
You make a compelling argument about the role played by key social policy specialists, in left-liberal think tanks such as the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, networks such as the Social Policy Reform Group during the 1980s, and then the Child Poverty Action Group through the 1990s. Did you find that these groups, and the individuals who worked within them, struggled to find a balance between advocate and activist? Did their identity as policy experts contribute to taking the politics out of poverty as a social and economic issue?

Wendy McKeen
In *Money in Their Own Name* I try to show the importance of key national social policy or anti poverty research and advocacy bodies like the Canadian Welfare Council (which later became the Canadian Council on Social Development), the National Council of Welfare, and to some extent, the National Anti-Poverty Organization, as the progressive "voice" in Canada on social policy and poverty. I examine their significance in influencing the way women's movement organizations would come to define "women's" interests in key debates relating to federal child benefits programs. The status and credibility of these organizations was due in large part to their long term involvement in the social policy field (especially CCSD) and the reputation they gained for producing quality research and policy analysis. Your question addresses the limitations of the standpoint of "expertise" as represented by this community. Both the liberalism of the organizations and their male-centricity seem to have been important factors, and I can comment on this in relation to gender issues and the constraints on feminist influence in the social policy field and in

defining social problems.

First, a major focus in my book was to trace the tendency of these groups to politicize the issue of poverty in ways that affected the ability of women's groups to be involved in poverty debate. These organizations worked hard to maintain their influence in the face of growing pressures from neoliberal forces, and one of their main strategies for politicizing the issue of poverty was to highlight the plight of particularly disadvantaged categories of the population – e.g. children, single mothers, the elderly, and so on. I argue that while this practice was well-intentioned, it ultimately shifted both poverty as an issue, and social policy debate generally, in "liberal" as opposed to "social" directions, and this, in turn, tended to ease the way for neo-liberal perspectives that were bent on individualizing social problems. In short, the debate now defined these groups as problem groups and the individuals within them as problem individuals. With respect to women, for example, highlighting the poverty of single mothers also served to categorize single mothers as somehow *different* from other women, and in this way failed to make visible the ways women generally are more susceptible to becoming poor in their lives – for example, because of lack of equal access to quality employment and educational opportunities, having major responsibilities for child care and the care of other vulnerable people, and so on. Similarly, mobilizing around the theme of child poverty seemed to facilitate the ability of governments to avoid addressing the real causes of poverty that lay in the economic insecurity of the parents, grounded in such factors as unemployment, low wages, racial and gender discrimination, and the lack of basic social services such as childcare.

Second, there is the matter of male centricity within the advocacy organizations. On the one hand, my research suggested that the male policy analysts who had the greater legitimacy as progressive advocates were drawn to working with hard data and the complex technicalities of social programs at the expense of discussing broader social principles. This was particularly apparent in the early 1980s when key analysts within the NCW and CCSD were more intent on out-modeling the federal Finance Department by developing a bigger, better child tax credit system. Such modeling exercises lacked any substantive critical discussion of the principles of universality, or of horizontal equity for that matter . Important social principles were set aside in this period, and social policy "debate" seemed to be reduced to technical choices over threshold levels, tax-back rates, or turning points, etc. On the other hand, this community displayed an unwillingness at critical moments to support issues and ideas that were important to women or reflected a woman's reality. There are examples in the context of social policy struggle of the last several decades of these progressive organizations actively resisting the more radical strains of feminism, as illustrated, for example, in the opposition of the Social Policy Reform Group to the idea of individual entitlement to child benefits and to feminist arguments concerning the importance of the family allowance for women 's autonomy. Overall, I sense that this community failed in many ways to take up the issues that have been advanced by women's groups (particularly those at the community level), and especially concerning the crucial link between adequate independent income or social benefits for women, and the issue of male violence and abuse of women within the household.

Both these orientations, liberalism and male centricity, can been seen as factors that contributed in an overall way to the ideological backlash against feminism that took place in the 1990s, which went along with the significant defunding of important women's groups, and a general retreat on the very practice of gender analysis of poverty and social policy issues.

Jennifer Stephen
Women continue to rank among the most impoverished, in Canada and globally. Is this a subject that will continue to draw your attention, as a feminist and as a scholar?

Wendy McKeen
My current research continues down the path of exploring the feminist voice in the social policy debate in Canada by focusing on welfare politics in the province of Ontario from the late 1960s to the present, with a detailed focus on struggles over gender and the construction of women's welfare rights, as waged between feminist and social policy advocates and dominant actors within government. My continuing interest in the topic of the feminist voice in poverty and social policy politics is not purely academic or historical, but connects with my feminist politics and observations about how past struggles have played into current realities. The story of feminist (second wave) voice in social policy debate in Canada is very poignant and so far, it seems to have involved a rise and then a great fall, and we are now seeing the results of this. On the one hand, in terms of philosophical foundations, the Canadian welfare state seems to have become increasingly more apathetic, if not hostile, towards women as a group. The policy changes over the past few decades reflect a closer embrace of the ideal of the possessive individual (as opposed to the social-individual). This can be seen in the movement of governments towards residual programs which place the onus for welfare onto individuals and position women as workers but without accounting for the fact that women continue to do the bulk of the necessary care labour. One example of this is the changes in the "employment insurance" system. As Monica Townson and Kevin Hayes point out in their 2007 report on women and EI (published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives), the policy changes made in 1995 were based on assumptions about work that ignored the way women's work patterns and labour force participation differed from men's. Consequently, since the new rules have been implemented, the number of women workers covered by EI has continued to drop relative to men. The same movement can be seen in many of the community programs funded under the national children's agenda and/or early childhood development. Their objective is to cure "dependency," and while they are framed as policies for families, the real clients of these programs are often poor and/or otherwise marginalized women. These women are expected to be workers like any other with no provision for the care work they do (for example, accessible, quality childcare). There is no concern about bringing them out of poverty. Instead, they are expected to take even low quality, low paid jobs. These conditions mean that increasing numbers of women, and especially the most marginalized women (and their children), are left more or less trapped in situations characterized by overwork, deepening poverty, and insecurity. The personal costs are huge, including severe consequences to mental and physical health and well-being among women and their children. The continuation of this double bind situation is reflected in the growing poverty rates for many women and children. One of the key findings of a recent study of

poverty in the City of Toronto reported that the poverty of lone parent families is growing in leaps and bounds and that, as of 2005, over 50% of lone parent families in the City of Toronto are low-income. The National Council of Welfare also reports that the majority of those relying on social assistance in Canada are women, children, and people with disabilities.

The irony is that much of the mainstream social policy analysis, even within progressive quarters, continues to be gender-blind (or has reached a new low in gender blindness). Many current studies on the issue of poverty either ignore gender or make only passing reference to it, often using "politically correct" gender neutral language. The recent United Way study of poverty in the city of Toronto is an all-too common example of this. This report does not discuss gender, although there is some attention to issues of race and the situation of new immigrants. It uses only the gender neutral term of family poverty (divided into two-parent and lone-parent). This limited standpoint has led to recommendations that are very general, and while some of the changes suggested might be beneficial to women (particularly increasing the protections of those in precarious employment and addressing the lack of access to EI and training), none reflect specific factors affecting women and their children, especially the known gender gap in the work patterns, quality of employment, or access to EI benefits. Certainly, there is little to no attention paid to the *consequences* of poverty for women and the way it affects their relationships with others (especially their children and others for whom they care). None of these recent studies address the violence and trauma that is frequently women's experience as both cause and consequence of poverty and economic insecurity. It is simply not seen as an important case of injustice. A rare contrast to the dominant male-centred approach to research is the recent fact book on "women's experiences of social programs for people with low incomes" published by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (one of the few national women's groups still in existence).

In sum, the goal of my work is to provide accounts of recent decades of social policy politics that takes gender and women's struggles in this field seriously. My hope is that this will in some way help highlight both the need for, and the possibility of, making transformative change of the kind that would make life more viable for women and marginalized groups, ultimately to advance patterns of change that recognize meaningful alternatives to the neo-liberal possessive individualist model.