It only really makes sense to emphasise women’s participation in public politics if it can be shown that policy outcomes do affect women. This chapter looks at the impact of public policy on women. The growing literature that examines such policy in different national and historical contexts makes clear that women, as a distinct group, have been importantly affected. A comparative approach also suggests a possible explanation for the form that policies towards women have taken.

The primary concern here is with the impact of ‘male-dominated’ politics, and so analysis will be confined to developments prior to the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s. The focus will be on the impact of politics on women’s status. Social scientists employ the term ‘status’ in a number of different ways. Here, following Giele, it will be equated with ‘life options’ (Giele, 1977a, p. 4). This chapter examines women’s options in the following spheres: powers within marriage, control of sexuality and fertility, rights and duties as mothers, control of wealth and income, employment and education.

Non-Marxist and Marxist political scientists are increasingly agreed that the political sphere is not simply instrumental to social forces, to groups or classes; it has practices, resources and interests of its own and acts back upon society. By what means has public policy impinged upon women’s status? Laws have often been passed which, while reflecting prevailing or least socially dominant attitudes, reinforced these attitudes by articulating them, imparting definition and authority, and thus helped to prolong them beyond what would otherwise have been their ‘natural’ lifespan. For
instance, France’s Napoleonic Code included a clause attributing all powers within marriage to the husband, which was not revoked until 1938. At other times, however, such laws reflected not so much dominant values embodied in practice as prevalent myths that were contradicted by reality, so that in fact the laws changed women’s status. The law could also anticipate changing values, as for example Britain’s 1967 Abortion Reform Law.

Usually the law or policy would be backed up by sanctions or the positive distribution of resources. Thus in many countries in the past and still in some today, procuring an abortion is a crime punishable by law. The law regulates, through the use of sanctions, what women can do. It also intervenes in women’s access to resources; it can deny women rights to property and income, or, as more recently, it can actually direct public resources in ways that influence women’s status, as in subsidies for nursery provision.

Laws and policies have not only affected women’s status directly. In the past, indeed, it has often seemed that the law had little to say specifically about women. Part of the reason was the importance attached to the ‘privacy’ of the family, within which women were largely confined. Nowadays in Britain such privacy is increasingly absent as the Welfare State authorises the intervention of social workers, magistrates and the police; Wilson goes so far as to say that ‘social welfare policies amount to no less than the state organisation of domestic life’ (Wilson, 1977, p. 9). Even so McIntosh argues that the state still ‘intervenes’ less conspicuously in the lives of women than of men (McIntosh, 1978, p. 256). As she rightly concludes, this requires us to examine not only the direct effects of policies upon women, but also the part played by the state ‘in establishing and sustaining systems in which women are oppressed and subordinated by men’ (ibid., p. 259). Such an approach reveals that apparent respect for privacy has often in fact been ‘coercive’, as when the public authorities refused to intervene in wife-battering. It also points us to the indirect implications of present policies: for instance, the way in which social security is administered in Britain tends to reinforce the wife’s economic dependence on her husband.

**Politics and women’s status in Britain**

If these are the means by which policy has helped to shape women’s status, what has been the cumulative impact of politics and policies