Feminism and policy-making

The present wave of feminism has undoubtedly had an impact on policy; it has brought to the fore and redefined issues previously neglected, helped to secure major changes in official policy and ensured that these are at least partially implemented. In this chapter I want to focus on feminism's involvement in the detailed process of policy-making. What have been the most effective feminist tactics? How much can feminists achieve through this kind of political participation? To what extent does the adverse economic and political climate of the 1980s put in jeopardy successes of the 1970s and require different kinds of feminist action?

Where a few years ago there were only a few case studies of the process by which particular policies or decisions of concern to feminists were reached, and these generally confined to Britain and the US, there are now more sources to draw on. Case studies span a wider range of countries and there have also been more explicit attempts at cross-national comparison. These studies remain largely centred on the Western democracies but this is where in any case feminism to date has had most policy-making impact.

In order to explore the policy-making context, this chapter considers two rather different kinds of policy issue which have both been important targets of feminist activity, abortion and equal employment rights. While examining in greatest detail the determination of policy in these areas in Britain and America, I shall also look at the experience of other Western democracies, taking account of the contribution of the EEC. The final section specifically addresses the implications of the changing context of policy-making in the 1980s.
Abortion rights

Abortion emerged in the early 1970s as almost the definitive issue of contemporary feminism. For radical feminists it symbolised women’s sexual and reproductive self-determination, but under their influence other feminists also came to recognise its importance for women’s individual freedom of choice and effective participation in the public sphere. This was the issue around which the French, Italian and West German women’s liberation movements really coalesced. Possibly with the sole exception of Sweden, with its early liberalisation of abortion law, Western feminist movements this time round have everywhere campaigned either to reform, or to defend and extend existing reforms in the law. If the issue of abortion has lost its central place latterly in the concerns of Western feminism, this is partly because abortion law has been liberalised. In Latin America, by contrast it is a main focus of the growing feminist movement.

If initially some conservative feminists were resistant – in 1967 for instance NOW split on the question – by the late 1970s a feminist opposed to the legal provision of abortion, though not necessarily without some restrictions, would have seemed almost a contradiction in terms. There have been disagreements about the necessary extent of reform, whether women should have ‘abortion on demand’. As time has gone by, abortion has also ceased to appear such a morally or ideologically straightforward issue for feminists. In France it led feminists into a closer examination of what it meant to be a woman and potentially a mother (Duchen, 1986). In Italy, in particular, women engaged in the pro-abortion campaign recognised the complexities surrounding the issue. It seemed for instance that even where effective means of contraception were available, many women needed abortions, suggesting that they still felt guilty about having sex for pleasure rather than to procreate (Caldwell, 1986). Socialist feminists have expressed misgivings about basing the demand for abortion reform on women’s individual ‘right to choose’. As Himmelweit points out, such a claim appears to condone women’s relegation to a private sphere, at the same time as feminists in other ways are challenging it.

Are we implicitly accepting that separation of production and reproduction into the social and the private? Are we accepting