Cracking the Gender Lens: the De-Politicization of Gender in BC

By

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2003

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**ABSTRACT**

Gender has developed as an important ‘public and political’ category throughout the Twentieth Century in BC and Canada as the basis of feminist demands on society and governments. In 2007, gender has become ‘privatized’ and increasingly erased from government institutions. The de-politicization of gender in Canada is an example of a shifting social consciousness and political discourse that avoids a critical perspective on the social context and places an increasing emphasis on the individual. A new critical discourse must grapple with these challenges, emerge at some distance from government and coincide with a political activism that has resonance in women’s lives.
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Introduction

Feminists have argued for equality for women in society from within the existing political system and from the outside; through grassroots organizing, public protest and pressure on government. British Columbia women’s political history in the last century demonstrates a strong engagement with both social movement strategies and also an increased involvement in elected and bureaucratic forms of government and the legal system. The turn of this century closes a significant era of gains for women, politically, socially and legally.

In this next era, feminism and the status of women in society are gradually being erased from political discourse. State feminism, that is the integration of feminist analysis into bureaucratic state structures and institutions, is disappearing from the public agenda. The Canadian government has limited the political influence of Status of Women Canada and stepped back from financial supports to feminist organizations (Standing Committee 2005). Many provincial governments say little about the location of women in society, having given up being concerned with issues of representation, and are virtually silent to the lobby of feminists about policies that may affect women. Government does not analyze the impact of its cutbacks to programs that disproportionately affect historically disadvantaged groups. The Gender Lens, as a policy tool collects dust on bureaucratic shelves (BC Ministry of Women’s Equality 1993).

There is no indication that the decrease in government focus on the status of women can be understood as a response to a shift in feminist priorities or a change in the

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1 The Gender Lens is undated on this version of the document, but there is evidence that the analytic tool was in use by 1994. In a workshop on November 19, 1994 at the Conference “Stopping the Violence; Changing Families; Changing Futures, the Gender Lens is cited as 1993 (Ministry of Women’s Equality 1994). A subsequent version was published in 1996 and circulated widely throughout BC government (see Teghtsoonian 2003).
direction of feminist strategy. Instead, feminism as a critical perspective of gender in the social context has lost considerable legitimacy and salience in BC and English Canada.

In the following discussion, chapter 1 considers how gender has developed throughout the Twentieth Century as a ‘politicized’ rather than ‘privatized’ construct and has been used successfully in English Canada as the basis of feminist demands on society and governments. In making gender political in English Canada, feminists have resisted attempts in political discourse to limit the definition of ‘the political’ as distinctly separate from domestic and intimate aspects of life. Gender as a category is political when it is not ‘privatized’ and is used as a basis of group claims on society and government to address gendered social hierarchies. The social reform roots of English Canadian feminism have assured consistent engagement with the state through the use of a critical perspective of gender within the social context. The success of gender as a political category has been distinctly related to the capacity of women’s movements to sustain a critical scrutiny on society and on societal structures.

Chapter 2 explores how the gains of the women’s movement over the last decades have reached a stalemate, with reduced space for political activism and considerably fewer opportunities for engagement with the state. Success had been measurable by Government’s willingness to adopt the feminist definition of the ‘subordinated status of women in society’ as a policy problem and to integrate ‘women’s equality’ into state structures. Since the mid 1990’s, gender and the ‘status of women’ as a policy problem has been gradually erased from political discourses, in spite of considerable successes in institutionalizing women’s equality claims in the past. The BC case is explored as a particularly strong example of this trend.
In Chapters 3 and 4, the de-politicization of gender is seen as signaling a shift in social and political discourse. The first element of this shift is visible in discussions related to theoretical problems associated with the category of gender. These problems are important to address and resolve within feminist theory and in practical application. Nonetheless, these problems have reduced the capacity of feminists to sustain scrutiny on society as the source of understanding social ills disproportionately affecting women as a group. Academic discourses have explored gender as a social category difficult to use in analysis. The theme of gender as problematic has limited the capacity of feminists to respond to policy shifts that have turned away from a focus on ‘women’s status.’ A preoccupation with problems related to the category of gender has diverted attention away from a focus on society and qualified the nature of the critique in order to avoid criticisms. The problems associated with gender are also constrained within the context of an ‘individualized’ social framework in which the category of gender is ‘privatized’ and not seen as the concern of government. In the attempt to resolve theoretical problems, the feminist critical perspective on the social context has been muted.

The second element of a shift in social and political discourse is visible in a look at policy framing and the philosophical underpinnings that place the ‘individual’ as the main focus of programs. The discourse and arguments emerging from the policy community associated with family violence point to an increasing focus since the mid-1990’s on individuals who grapple with problems and need support to build their skills. The creation of this ‘parallel discourse’ (Van Beveren and Verloo 2004) in which the social problem of family violence is de-contextualized, places an emphasis on individuals and their capacity to make use of opportunities and create their own best life.
In chapter 5, the de-politicization of gender is seen as an example of a shifting social and political discourse that avoids a critical perspective on society. The problematization of gender and a shift in policy framing to a focus on individuals, point to features of the same phenomenon, of a shifting social consciousness and devolution of a feminist critical perspective on the social context. The erosion of gender as a political category is related to many reasons, including the economic and neo-liberal agendas of government. The discourse also operates within an increasingly individualized and ‘privatized’ framework that point to a conception of the individual that is produced within a post global context. This conception of the individual is located within highly individualized state and bureaucratic contexts in which feminists must navigate and develop their critical approach. The discourse significantly constrains the capacity of feminists to maintain a critical perspective that looks at social arrangements which are unfairly hierarchical.

In chapter 6, attempts to provide solutions to problems related to the category of gender have tended to deepen the problem within an individualized framework. Feminist face challenges to respond to the problematization of gender and renew a critical perspective on the social context. In a significantly ‘privatized’ discourse, the ‘political and public’ sphere is reduced. Responses to problems associated with gender, including the women as unitary category debate, the creation of gender dilemmas and the victim problem have tended to reinforce the direction of government.

In the conclusion, I argue for a feminist approach that learns from the past but responds to the future and maintains its critical view on the social context. For feminists in the new millennium, the years ahead pose a challenge to find ways to articulate gender
that will stimulate the imagination of young women and revitalize a new movement. In these pages, the main assertion is for a renewed critical perspective which maintains its social orientation in which society, social structures, systems and social relationships are brought under scrutiny. Making gender ‘public and political’ includes understanding that gender is both socially produced and individually defined. A critical perspective is crucial to a continued politicization of women’s equality claims. The community and grassroots feminist movement continues to be an important source of a critical perspective, and must grapple with theoretical challenges and emerge at some distance from government. Critical discourse must coincide with a political activism that has resonance in women’s lives.
Chapter 1: Making gender political

English Canadian women’s political history in the last century demonstrates a strong engagement with a range of strategies, including social movement and grassroots organizing, increased involvement in elected and bureaucratic forms of government, and a strong orientation toward the legal system. Through a variety of methods including grassroots, state, academic and legal strategies, the women’s movement has successfully advanced equality for women in English Canada. This chapter explores the success of the women’s movement as measured by the degree of popular social support and responsiveness of government toward women’s equality claims. These successes I argue, are related to the feminist capacity to sustain a ‘critical perspective of gender in the social context’ and maintain the category of gender as a legitimate basis for claims on government. In spite of such considerable success, the ‘status of women’ in English Canada in the new millennium is consistently being eroded as an area of policy focus. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the historical context which precedes the current phenomenon, in which gender is de-politicized and no longer a concern of governments. The de-politicization of gender as a political category is a radical departure from the policy direction of the last decades in English Canada.

Gender as a ‘politicized rather than privatized’ construct, has been used successfully throughout the Twentieth Century in English Canada as the basis of demands on society and governments. Making gender relevant to political discourses starts analytically with the proposition that society is structured along gender lines. Feminists have resisted attempts in political discourse to limit the definition of the
‘political’ as distinctly separate from ‘the private sphere’ and the domestic and intimate aspects of life (Arneil 1999; Squires 1999). By the ‘private sphere,’ I mean the part of social life that citizens consider outside of the control and influence of governments. What is seen as ‘private’ includes some aspects of the economy and the ability for individuals to participate freely in the marketplace; in commerce, industry and producing wealth. The private sphere also represents the area of the domestic, where people live in the ‘privacy’ of their own homes (see Arneil 1999).

By the ‘political,’ I mean the part of social life where citizens make claims on governments and other social institutions to seek a response to their individual needs. Although individuals may be acting politically, the individual request or demand may not be of concern to society at large and of interest to other political actors. However, if the claim is similar to others for reasons that are common to others in a group, there may be an opportunity to influence changes in broader systems. In a ‘consciousness-raising’ element of group formation, patterns of disproportionality are discovered and resonate with people as they recognize how patterns relate to their own range of experiences. The pattern, in which a category such as gender is seen to have relevance to the manner society is organized, must be apparent to those within the group and readily explicable and visible to others.

Where the political is broadly defined, groups act on society in order to influence its organization, structure, or its distribution of goods and benefits. The realm of the political is negotiated in social and public spaces where people seek to influence social structures. Potentially, the political includes those spaces in which people are willing to be subject to state regulation, control or protection. Individuals become unified as a group
if they recognize they have some common experience related to their social position. For example, a gendered group forms when there is recognition that being male or female contributes to a recognizable pattern of benefits, burdens, goods, status, and social power.

Social change is only possible if through consciousness-raising, the claims of the group are plausible to people and they are persuaded to join the group or support its claims. When gender is used to frame group claims, gender as a category becomes political when it is used as a basis of group claims on society and governments and resonates with the general populace and with political actors. When gender is used as a basis of group claims on society, a crucial element of politicizing gender is in its scrutiny on society and its ‘critical perspective on gender in the social context.’

For many feminists, all social spaces are negotiated and enter the political terrain of power and privilege. Definitions that construct borders between public and private realms of society are a creation of those who hold power and identify the areas of social life in which society and governments are active. By expanding the definition of what counts as political, a broader area of social relations is seen to contribute and undermine the wellbeing of people, through inclusion, status and benefits. For example, feminists have long insisted that ‘the personal’ is ‘political’ by which they mean that personal relations are a microcosm of social relations and potentially oppressive for women. This slogan and the political message it advanced, allowed feminists and government to scrutinize as ‘public and political’ those issues which would otherwise be seen as ‘private’ and beyond the ambit of government or civil society (Prentice 1988). Making gender ‘political’ is about framing political discourse so as to illuminate how gender structures society, including those issues related to gender seen as occurring in the
‘private sphere.’ The group based on gender acts politically when, on the basis of its shared experience or claim, it seeks to enhance the position of the group as a whole by altering social and political structures that systematically disadvantage the group within society. Such group activity is part of the discourse used to frame the problem, its causes and solutions.

Feminism, as the foundation for a variety of movements over the last six decades is ideologically and socially diverse. To consider movements utilizing gender as a single phenomenon in which a focus on a ‘critical perspective of gender in the social context’ is the common feature of such diverse feminisms, risks oversimplifying its inherent diversity (Mazur 2002: 26). However, the proposition is to observe how gender is utilized through discourse and frame analysis (Verloo 2004) to achieve goals that have led to social change. The success of feminists to advance women’s equality is related to the movement’s capacity to articulate a critical perspective of society and social structures, and progress has been stalemated when the critical perspective is muted. Out of the critical gaze of activists, the relevance of gender to political discourse was born. This study demonstrates the significance of feminist critical approaches to the success of feminist political objectives.

In a state-centered society that sees gender as politically relevant, governments find they must take into account how gender is implicated and negotiated within policy. Amy Mazur (2002) equates feminist policy with a critical perspective, identifying “core ideas” which are “typically recognized” as part of feminist theories (3). Part of Mazur’s analysis seeks to “determine systematically whether nominally feminist policies are actually feminist” and consider whether policy outcomes achieve feminist goals (4).
Mazur identifies these goals as related to the “advancement of women’s rights, status or condition…and the reduction or elimination of gender-based hierarchy or patriarchy that underpins basic inequalities between men and women in the public and private spheres” (Mazur 2002: 3). For Mazur, the feminist project is to embed critical theory and its concepts in policy language and policy outcomes. Mazur measures policy to determine the overall success of feminists to achieve goals.

This paper builds on Mazur’s project, to create a broad definition of a feminist critical perspective that is capable of sustaining gender as a political category and maintaining its salience in the public eye. Gender is politicized when it is used to frame group claims and forms a critical approach that has the following features:

- It identifies structural inequalities embedded in social norms, relationships and institutions.
- It reveals how social categories such as gender regulate social positions and benefits within society.
- It articulates a set of fair and just arrangements and promotes an improved condition for women overall.

When feminist language engages with a critical perspective of gender in a social context and forms a part of social and political discourse; including the written product of governments, courts and legislative activity, the best conditions for influence and social change are present.

**Social reform roots of English-Canadian feminism**

The success of feminism is related to its capacity, in spite of its inherent diversity, to maintain a critical perspective as defined in the above framework. In this chapter, I argue broadly that gender has been used as a political category in English Canada in three distinct ways: 1) to change and improve social conditions for all people; 2) to improve
conditions for women as a group; and 3) to illuminate bias, exclusion and discrimination. An undercurrent of these approaches to gender is a critical perspective that has a social analysis, recognizes how ‘gender’ regulates social positions and benefits, and proposes social change. The social reform bases of English-Canadian women’s movements have assured that a critical perspective, or a critical view toward society is an essential underpinning of its many approaches and strategies.

In English Canada, the women’s movement has demonstrated a commitment to social reform objectives (see Bashevkin 1985). The social reform impetus to politicizing gender has been at its most basic level, a social critique. Society has been the object under scrutiny, as have the political institutions that have held social conditions in place or failed to alleviate them. In the late 19th and early 20th century, women in English Canada sought to influence their social and political world by bringing a gendered perspective to improve social conditions, in order to preserve a particular way of life and mitigate the harsh effects of economic growth (Bashevkin 1985: 4-5). The social reform origins of English-Canadian feminism informed many early movements to work toward greater inclusion and influence in the public sphere. Therefore, women’s suffrage in English Canada and the push for inclusion in male dominated institutions had roots in English-Canadian socialism and a social reform agenda (Bashevkin 1985). Many women argued that society was unbalanced or missing the ‘feminine’, in addition to the position that membership in society and exclusion from political life was based on arbitrary and irrelevant differences between men and women. For example, the early movement known as maternal feminism identified a public-private divide that recognized the world of politics and economics as male dominated. Women brought gender into the political
realm in order to bring a moral and rehabilitative influence, or a ‘woman’s touch’ to politics and society (Nelson and Robinson 1999: 87-88, 490-491).

Not only have women’s movements in English Canada held an undercurrent of critical theory, movements have consistently acted politically in its most overt definition, of direct action on the state, through policy, funding, legislation and the courts. Even with disagreement on strategy, and an aversion to engaging with institutions seen as corrupt and unfriendly to women, women put pressure on governments to address societal conditions and its impact on women. In what Bashevkin identifies as ‘independence vs. partisanship’ (1985: 3-32) strategic disagreements, many women resisted joining political institutions and focused on community and social reform through programs, churches, readings and social gatherings. For example, women’s groups such as those that emerged out of an agrarian feminism in rural Ontario and Western provinces, concentrated on social and agricultural reform, domestic practices and preserving rural life from the appeal and excesses of urban centers (Carbert 1995: 8-9). However, even though these groups were averse to ‘men’s politics’, they did not avoid pressuring governments to respond to their concerns about social conditions. As community work appeared political and the work of farm women was not always different from that of men, distinctions between the public and private as separate spheres were not always clear in agrarian settings. Women’s Institutes, although relatively independent, ‘non sectarian and non partisan’ (11), were since early in the 20th century partially funded in the west through provincial agricultural ministries. These groups later belonged to the policy community dominated by the Farm Women’s Bureau of Agriculture Canada…established in 1981 (20, 21). In spite of reluctance to engage with the state, women found support for social
reform through governments and became adept at articulating their claims through arguments based on gender. That these claims were articulated through a critical perspective provides a commonality that helped to sustain and make salient a range of feminisms. The common ground for arguments based on gender was that patterning based on gender existed in society and proved to be a detriment for women or for society as a whole.

**Engagement with the state**

The social reform agenda of English-Canadian feminists has made resistance to state engagement in English Canada unlikely, as support for programs and relief measures have been understood to be the responsibility of governments. Women entered into public life as industrialization created a demand for female workers. In the early 20th century, single women entered the work force in large numbers in urban centres, finding employment in female concentrated workplaces in professions such as garment manufacture and telephone operation. Early trade unionism intermingled with social reform agendas and some of the earliest labour strikes were carried out by women. For example as early as 1907, female telephone operators went on strike in Toronto protesting low wages and conditions of work. In 1920, two years after some women obtained the federal franchise, government addressed issues in the workplace such as hours, and conditions of work and minimum wage for women long before these issues were addressed for men (Burt 1988). Women’s early involvement in the activities of political parties was mostly limited to support roles through ladies auxilaries for the election of male candidates (Young 2000: 134). However, “in the 1930’s, women in the
CCF organized to pressure the party into addressing the concerns of women, particularly farm women, wage earning women, and women on relief” (134-135). In the post war building of the Canadian welfare state, women were “frequent beneficiaries of social programs” (Andrew 1984: 670) and integral as both “an important source of employment…on the front lines delivering welfare services, (and) also their chief consumers” (Evans and Wekerle 1997: 4). The earliest Canadian federal government department dedicated to the concerns of women was in the Ministry of Labour’s Women’s Bureau formed in 1954 to address labour concerns specific to women (Geller-Schwartz 1995: 41). Social reform roots and a concern for the impact of growth on women and other members of society made English Canadian feminism a movement that never strayed far from interaction with government in order to improve conditions.

As women sought to increase representation and entry to professions such as medicine and law, liberal feminists pushed to participate in government and positions of influence as members equal and the same to men (Burt 1988). From social reform origins, feminists were increasingly aware that exclusion from social structures and professions required the recognition of inequality and discrimination within existing institutions (Bashevkin 1985: 5). These women sought to eliminate gender distinctions as a barrier to public life and politicized gender to highlight biases. Whether women were seen as different or the same as men, the arguments for inclusion or influence rested on a critical assessment of society and of gender (Squires 1999).
The feminist critical perspective and the state

The feminist ‘critical perspective’ became consistently more explicit in its focus on the social context with an overall concern about women’s status in Canadian society. A focus on women’s status by definition is to assert that society is configured within a particular social structure. The post war period, with increased awareness about civil and human rights, provided the link between the welfare state and an emerging politicized collectivity of women in the 1960’s and 1970’s (Evans and Wekerle 1997). For over fifty years, gender as a political category although used in different ways, had formed the basis of claims on society for social change, better conditions for women, and equality in institutions. Women concerned with the impact of economic growth on the socially disadvantaged fought for more social reform. Farm women had a strong voice about agricultural concerns in a developing English Canada (Carbert 1995). Women broke barriers to institutions, governments, and areas of employment (Bashevkin 1985; Burt 1988). Political parties had provided fertile ground for ideologically similar women to bring forward concerns for women in employment and needing relief (Young 2000). By the early 1960’s, the peace and civil rights movements, student demonstrations, and Quebec separatism all contributed to a political climate of social criticism in which a gender-based analysis was prominent (Nelson and Robinson 1999).

The first fifty years of making gender political had set the stage for women to organize as women on behalf of women and on behalf of society. The heightened awareness of rights generally, exposed gender bias or sexism as a deficiency in women’s rights and became framed in the context of women’s equality and status (Nelson and Robinson 1999). Women became increasingly mobilized around the position and status
of women in society generally (Rebick 2005). The mobilization around women’s status was the feminist movement’s clearest articulation of gender as a basis for its critical perspective and as evidence and rationale for social programs and reform.

Many groups formed to lobby for women’s equality and an improvement to the status of women. In 1963, US author Betty Friedan had written the *Feminine Mystique*, which pointed to a broad discontent experienced by American women trapped within the social roles of wife, housewife and caregiver (Friedan 1963). In 1966, Therese Casgrain founded the Federation des femmes du Quebec (Rebick 2005: 28), and in 1967 Laura Sabia president of the Canadian Federation of University Women formed the Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada (22). In this same year, the Toronto Women’s Liberation Movement, the Feminine Action League in Burnaby and the Vancouver Women’s Caucus in B.C. (Rebick 2005: 8 ) emerged from student’s movements on university campuses. A group of women student activists from the Student Union for Peace Action attended the 1968 Women’s Liberation Conference in Chicago, in which ‘consciousness raising’ formed part of the agenda (Women Unite 1972: 9).

Consciousness raising was a means to bring together women in suburban families to create awareness of their subordinate position within families (Dreifus 1973). Dreifus argues that consciousness-raising (CR) was the “cornerstone of the new feminism” (6). Women were invited to share their experience and to recast the ‘personal’ into the larger social and political context. These influences from the US movement spurred a critical perspective in English Canada that introduced scrutiny into the domestic or ‘private’ sphere and into women’s social roles and position within the family.
In addition, feminists alerted women to a growing awareness of a link on the one hand, with their sexuality and reproductive capacity and, on the other hand, with their social position. Birth control was one area of concern, for which women lobbied government and gathered to change social opinions. The *Birth Control Handbook* circulated among university students at McGill University in 1968 created considerable controversy, emphasizing that the status of women was related to their ability to have control over their own bodies. In the same year 17 women from the Vancouver Women’s Caucus traveled to Ottawa in the ‘Abortion Caravan’, stopping in communities to raise awareness and collect supporters for their pro-choice movement and the right to safe abortions. The *Birth Control and Abortion Bill* became law in 1969, which removed restrictions related to abortion, decriminalized homosexuality, and made birth control more accessible (Rebick 2005: 11).

The status of women became a rallying component of the argument for a variety of concerns of the women’s movement in spite of vast differences in ideology and in strategy. The call for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) emerged from a diverse range of women’s organizations which contributed their voices in support of the project. Bashevkin argues that the ability of feminisms to “coalesce around a status of women inquiry” points to the salience of the category of gender and its capacity to unite a significantly diverse group of women (1985: 23-25). Laura Sabia, president of the Canadian Federation of University Women in 1967, was able to ‘threaten’ the Pearson government to ‘march two million women on Ottawa’ in a Canadian national newspaper (Bashevkin 1985; Nelson and Robinson 1999: 502). The push on government for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women came through a range of strategies such as the use
of coalitions, formal briefs, lobbying, the media and potential public protest (Rebick 2005).

The status of women

With the formation in 1967 of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), Canadian feminists had united a country of women and achieved significant exposure for their cause of advancing women’s equality in the general public, to such a degree that the Canadian federal government was compelled to take notice. The Commission traveled throughout Canada hearing from groups and individuals about concerns about the status of women in Canada. In 1970, the RCSW tabled its Report with 167 recommendations in the House of Commons which represented for Canada a significant turning point toward an institutionalization of women’s equality claims (CBC Digital Archives).

English Canada’s women’s movement continued to be characterized by a consistent commitment to engagement with the state. The RCSW assured that government would continue to monitor and acknowledge a burgeoning and powerful women’s movement as a significant political voice crucial to address in order to ensure electoral success. The government first responded to the Report’s recommendation of a status of women department in 1971 by appointing a Minister Responsible for the Status of Women in the Privy Council (Gellar-Schwarz 1995: 43). In order to implement RCSW recommendations, equality organizations held the Strategy for Change Conference in 1972, which was supported by federal dollars and resulted in the formation of the National Action Committee (NAC) (Rebick 2005: 22-23). NAC grew to represent over
600 groups across Canada, identified its structure as a ‘parliament of women’ and formed a significant national political lobby and advisory to government (Gellar-Schwarz 1995: 53).

The culmination of women’s organizing in NAC as a national body provided a significant turning point in the use of gender in Canada as a legitimate basis of claims on government. Gender became a unit of analysis within a critical approach to social power. This approach was evident in the RCSW deliberations, emerged in NAC discussions, and appeared in subsequent government documents. The RCSW provides a good example of institutionalized engagement with a critical perspective and the acceptance of gender as a social and political category. For example, two recommendations read:

5. Men are becoming more conscious of the unbalanced nature of a social order in which everything centres on one sex alone.
6. Through the years, some women have protested at length, though often unheeded, in a world still insensitive to the social problem created by their status (RCSW 1970:2, emphasis added).

In this example and others, the Report recognizes women as having ‘subordinate’ status within society (1970: 13) and identifies the restrictive nature of women’s defined role within society, disputing stereotypes that “postulate the existence of an inferior ‘feminine’ nature in opposition to man”(10). The broad acceptance and use of gender as a political category in government at the time of the RCSW in the middle 1970’s, points to the degree the general public was willing to place society under a questioning and critical eye. In 1973, the government created the Women’s Program in the Human Resources Development department (HRDC) to create sources of funding for NGO’s working for women’s equality (Gellar-Schwartz 1995: 45). Vancouver along with other cities and provinces opened its Status of Women office in 1973 with funding from this Program
In addition, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women was appointed by government to provide an advisory role on RCSW implementation (Bashevkin 1985: 27). The Council, although short lived, was intended to be independent and to report to Parliament in order to fulfill its role to illuminate structural gender inequalities and bias. The initial commitment to creating a body to advise Government of gender bias points to the degree of salience of the issue of the status of women in the public eye.

In 1974, the United Nations (UN) sponsored an international seminar on the development of national machinery to advance the status of women worldwide. The UN declared the following year of 1975 to be the International Year of Women and the UN World Plan of Action. The Canadian Minister announced Canada’s commitment to the ‘…full integration of women and…to end discrimination’ (Gellar-Schwartz 1995: 46). The United Nations declared March 8, 1975 the first International Women’s Day with the theme ‘Bread and Roses’ which was meant to represent the need for a living wage and a better life for women (Rebick 2005: 116).

In the face of such international pressures, the government created a federal department in 1976 called the Status of Women Canada, with its own Minister to “engage in research, education and the coordination of roles” within government (Gellar-Schwartz 1995: 46). The department went beyond this mandate to include analysis of policy, programs and legislation for their impact on women. The Ministry could recommend changes and initiate policy in order to advance women’s equality. Each Ministry in government was also required to create an internal mechanism to address women’s status and equality. Every Cabinet memoranda, was required to provide a section on the impact
on women. By this decision, women’s issues were not seen within this process as a discrete category, and separate from the general concerns of the electorate. Women’s equality was understood as a ‘comprehensive process’ of all departments, in order to develop the ‘Canada Plan of Action for the Decade of Women’ released in 1979 (46-47). The UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1979 provided a strong confirmation of Canada’s direction and efforts in improving women’s equality in Canada (UN General Assembly 1979).

Given the salience of women’s status and women’s equality claims, violence against women and sexual assault were taken up by government as areas in which to concentrate on policy to improve women’s status in society (Rebick 2005: 169). For women’s movements and government, women’s equality and violence against women became inextricably intertwined. The grassroots anti-violence feminist movement engaged in highly political debates about women’s position in society. Through the media, public demonstrations and protest, movements erupted in English Canada which engaged in radical sexual politics and fought a battle for political and legal control of their bodies through issues such as access to abortion and childcare, the control of pornography, and the eradication of violence against women (Nelson and Robinson 1999). Separatism emerged as a political strategy to articulate and create an anti-masculine culture. Cultural feminists sought to reclaim stereotypical and demeaning images of women in order to celebrate the cultural contribution of women in music, literature and art. Women-only spaces, in order to provide safety and relief for survivors of male abuse and violence, were also created to allow space for a female consciousness and a heightened awareness of the female in social relationships (Rebick 2005). Women Centres and other equality
seeking organizations received program funding through the federal Women’s Programs located in Human Resources Development Canada, a fund that increased between 1980 and 1990 from $1,286,000 to $12,435,000 (Standing Committee 2005). The Women’s Programs mandate was “to support action by women's organizations and other partners seeking to advance equality for women by addressing women's economic, social, political and legal situation” (SWC 2006, emphasis added). The funding facilitated the ability of groups to create women-friendly spaces and also reinforce women’s political identity as a group.

**In the BC case**

In making gender political in English Canada, the BC provincial women’s movement was a pioneering and active participant in increasing awareness of gender as a political category. Many political firsts occurred in BC as a result of BC’s social feminism. For example, Mary Ellen Smith was the first female Cabinet Minister in the British Empire elected to the BC provincial legislature in 1918, a year after some women received the provincial vote. She resigned her portfolio when the government would not “meet its promise to create a portfolio for her to deal with women’s issues” (Erickson 1996: 107). Women’s organizations such as the Political Equality league and the New Era League actively engaged in social reform throughout the 1920’s by lobbying for legislation, improved health and education programs (Bashevkin 1985: 14). For example, BC had a minimum wage set for women as early as 1918 to provide protection for the number of women entering the workforce in female professions. Women were active in social reform in the development of the welfare state and BC was the first province to
make employment discrimination illegal under its *Human Rights Act* in 1969 (Burt 1988: 137). In order to further women’s equality in BC, the provincial NDP established a Women’s Committee in 1962 which became enhanced to further RCSW recommendations and promote “local organizing and educating on women’s rights” (Erickson 1996: 110).

During the 1970’s, the Vancouver Status of Women Canada branch office of the federal ministry SWC contracted with a feminist research team to identify the province’s jurisdiction in regard to RCSW recommendations. The research team (Women’s Research Team 1978) reported that the NDP government of 1972-1975 had set up a Status of Women Coordinator’s office to coordinate and develop government programs, assist community groups, and advise government about women’s issues. In 1974, the NDP’s Women’s Committee “issued a statement entitled *A Case for a Ministry of Women’s Rights* (97). In 1975, the NDP also set up a Women’s Economic Division within the Ministry of Economic Development. The division was charged with the responsibility “to examine, plan and recommend on all issues affecting the rights, economic development and economic status of women in BC…[and]…internally monitor projects within the Ministry” (95).

When Social Credit returned as government of BC, the party also demonstrated engagement with status of women issues. In 1977, the Provincial Secretary, Grace McCarthy, set up an eight member committee, ‘to examine recruitment and promotional practices as they apply to female employees or potential employees of the provincial government’ (Women’s Research Team 1978: 95). The government’s commitment to produce statistical accounting of women’s employment participation is apparent in
another document called *Women in British Columbia 1971-1981* which uses Statistics Canada data to demonstrate employment standings of women in BC during this period. In a document issued by the Ministry of Labour called *Women in British Columbia: A plan for progress*, Social Credit continued to engage with gender in the area of economic development (1986). In 1986, the Ministry of Labour created the division of Women’s Programs for “dealing with women’s issues in the province...[so that] women in BC realize their full potential...make a full contribution to our economic development [and] enjoy the benefits of that contribution”(4). The Ministry Report included acknowledgement of “women’s changing role, [and] rights to women’s participation in the social, political and economic” areas of society. In the Deputy Minister’s introductory statement, he stated his ‘commitment to improving the overall status of women in this province’ (Ministry of Labour 1986: 4).

BC was also a leader in English Canada in developments in the anti violence sector of the women’s movement. Violence against women was identified as a consequence of women’s inequality in BC and a highly politicized movement engaged with government to receive funding for transition houses and sexual assault centres. The first transition house in Vancouver formed in 1972 and opened in 1973 supported by women as volunteers. Victoria Transition House emerged in 1974 from the Victoria Women’s Centre which had started with a federal grant in 1971 (Victoria Women’s Transition House Society Website 2006). The first rape crisis services in BC were offered by phone from women’s homes in Vancouver and the first rape crisis centre was opened in Vancouver in 1973 by an organization called Vancouver Rape Relief. Many of these organizations followed a ‘women-only’ directive. The early political roots of anti-
violence work and its close association to improving women’s status in society, deeply informed the philosophical beliefs of these organizations (Rebick 2005: 71-73). By 1978, six shelters had joined together to form the group called the BC and Yukon Society of Transition Houses, a number which has grown to 91 Transition houses and Safe Home programs in BC (BCYSTH Website 2006).

The first International Family Violence Conference was held in Vancouver in 1975-76 and the awareness of violence against women as being related to women’s inequality became increasingly aligned in women’s programs and organizations. Battered Women’s Support Services and WAVAW opened in Vancouver in 1978 (Rebick 2005: 70). Five thousand women gathered from various locations in North America including Vancouver to attend a conference in San Francisco called “Feminist Perspectives on Pornography.” The first Take Back the Night protests occurred each evening along the San Francisco strip to protest a range of porn outlets and strip bars. Take back the Night in Vancouver occurred in the same year in 1978, organized by an “…ad hoc group called the ‘Fly by Night’ Collective” (Vancouver Rape Relief 2007). Women marched in large numbers to make a statement about their generalized fear about the violence of men and the belief that violence against women had prevented women from achieving full equality. During the 1980’s, the violence against women issue became entrenched in the policy agendas of government (see Ministry of AG 1986). In addition, shelters, sexual assault centres and women centres all received funding from provincial and federal governments.

Government had adopted feminist definitions of the problem and integrated the ‘status of women’ and ‘women’s equality’ into structures and programs and is further
explored in Chapter 4. Discourse between government and community activists in this period demonstrated receptivity to a ‘politicized’ understanding of gender and a tolerance for a critical perspective in which society was understood as unfairly hierarchical.

**Institutionalizing women’s equality**

Erickson describes the 1990’s in BC as the ‘feminization of the BC state’ (1996: 115). By examining BC in two areas, the appointment of women to senior positions and the creation of a Ministry dedicated to the status of women, Erickson argues that BC had achieved a state responsive to gender and improving women’s equality (1996: 115). As cited in the previous pages, many precursors existed before this decade which demonstrated an acknowledgement of gender as significant to the work of government. A focus on women by government in areas such as employment, childcare, and violence against women are visible in Hansard accounts of the proceedings of the BC legislature and in government documents, in the years before the Ministry of Women’s Equality was established. One NDP MLA in the Opposition party in 1972 takes note of four women MLA’s in the BC Legislature and warns the Government of this strengthening of women’s presence in political arenas. The MLA states that, “speaking of the status of women, let me tell this government that the women’s groups springing up across our province are very quickly learning how to wire themselves into the system” (Hansard February 3, 1972).

In addition, the provincial NDP was not the only political party that recognized that attention to women’s equality was crucial for political success. In 1975, Social Credit MLA, the Hon. Mr. MacDonald, conceded his concern about women working
underground in mines, and said “they [i.e. women] should have a right to the employment opportunity if they are suited to it” in the second reading debate on Bill 75 Status of Women and Men Amendment Act (Hansard May 13, 1975). In 1978, Grace McCarthy, the ‘Minister Responsible for Women’ under the Provincial Secretary, told her opponent that she would gratefully receive and wear a “T-shirt put together by the BC Liberal Commission which [said]‘a woman’s place is in the House and in the Senate’”(Hansard May 16, 1978). In 1989, Carol Gran became Minister of Government Services and Women’s Programs in the Social Credit government. As a precursor to the Ministry of Women’s Equality, the department of Women’s Programs also provided a coordinating role in government and provided grants to NGO’s (Ministry of Government Services 1989-1990: 1). In early 1990, with changes in federal and provincial funding formulas, the Minister “toured the province” and formed an Advisory council on Community based Programs for Women to “consult with women in the community about the needs of women” (Ministry of Government Services 1990-1991: 3). The Advisory Council’s recommendations included “equal representation of women in decision making bodies… and to address the feminization of poverty” (Advisory Council 1990). The Council Report used language that engaged with a critical social perspective of women’s position in society and included the following excerpt in its vision statement:

…to create a different reality; a reality based on respect to (sic) the rights of women to security, personal safety and well being; a reality which recognized the dual role played by many women as caregivers and paid workers; a reality in which women’s social, economic and political contributions are encouraged and valued equally; and a reality in which women have an equal share of power and influence (1990: 3).

The Government’s response document entitled Moving Forward: Initiatives for Women in BC (1990) provided funding for initiatives in childcare, victim services and violence
against women. The government language integrated a careful awareness of societal and structural barriers for women. The response made references to gender balance in decision making, gender neutral language, pay equity and employment equity for government employees (3).

Even with significant precursors toward a focus on women, Erickson (1996) is correct in identifying the significance of the 1990’s as a decade that appeared to bring to fruition the focus on gender as a political category in BC. In the 1991 Legislative session in BC the Social Credit Government identified in the Throne Speech that it would “dedicate itself to help women achieve equality in the workplace, economic security, and safety, both in the home and in the community” (Hansard May 7, 1991). In the 1992 Legislative session on March 17, the newly elected NDP Government congratulated itself on “taking positive steps towards achieving women’s equality, while dealing forthrightly with the consequence of gender inequality.” Seven cabinet posts were allocated to women, and half a $1million were committed to women’s programs. Another $1million in stabilization dollars was promised to women’s centers and pro-choice, childcare, anti violence and pay equity were cited as policy priorities. Legislation was introduced “to establish the first stand alone Ministry of Women’s Equality in BC” (Hansard March 17, 1992). Although, many initiatives had their origins in previous years, the Ministry of Women’s Equality (MWE) served to place women’s equality on a high footing in the NDP government’s policy agenda, through the General Gender Equality Plan. It served to heighten awareness of gender for all Ministries as a function of the MWE was to advise and bring a perspective of gender equality to all work of government (Erickson 1996: 119).
Early in its mandate, the MWE encouraged a gender initiative throughout government. An example of how this initiative was enacted within a department was evident in *Toward Justice for Women: First Annual Status Report* (Ministry of Attorney General 1994). The Gender Bias Committee of the Law Society (1992) had concluded that “gender bias is pervasive in the legal system of this province” (1–6). The Ministry’s response in the document *Fairness and Equality for Women in the Justice System* was to promise “efforts to achieve gender equality in the justice system and in society” (1992: 2). The Ministry of the Attorney General also produced the *Violence against Women in Relationships* (VAWIR) policy in 1993 after a two year consultation to expand the 1986 *Wife Assault Policy* (Ministry of Attorney General 1986). The VAWIR policy outlined the desired response of the criminal justice system to violence against women cases and used a critical analysis of intimate relationships that identified a “power imbalance between partners …perpetuated by societal and individual messages.” The policy itself is ‘gendered’ as was its predecessor, and focused on the social problem created by violence *against women*, rather than a focus on ‘domestic or spousal’ violence. The policy explains in a footnote to the introduction that “the term violence against women in relationships was chosen after much debate and concern expressed over the use of gender neutral terms [because of]…the overwhelming number of victims which are female” (Ministry of Attorney General 1993: 3).

Gender specific policy served is an example of a heightened awareness for feminists and for government actors that the experiences of women within social systems were different than those of men. Although Ministry responses varied in their incorporation of
gender in policy development, the Attorney General is a Ministry in which gender was comprehensively integrated in the justice policy area.

**Gender lens in BC**

The culmination of the integration of a critical gender perspective into state structures in BC is the development of the *Gender Lens: a Guide to Gender Inclusive Policy and Program Development* (Ministry of Women’s Equality: 1993). Developed at approximately the same time as the federal Status of Women Canada *Gender Based Analysis* (1996) both frameworks were intended to assist in eliminating gender bias from government policies.

The assumption of the *Gender Lens* was that systemic discrimination or bias was hidden within neutral policies and inadvertently supported and expressed a social reality experienced by men. The analytic device of a ‘lens’ is one in which the view of actors in government is influenced by the broader, mainstream social context to the degree that bias becomes invisible. Social problems are defined, understood, studied, framed and proposed to be resolved through the ‘lenses’ of an observer. The assumption is that policy analyses missed the social realities of some people, as the ‘lens’ of legislators and policymakers reflected a dominant ideology and through policy and legislation inadvertently reinforced structural inequalities.

The lens analogy points to an approach in which society and social arrangements are placed under scrutiny through a particular critical perspective. The use of a ‘lens’ as a means to consider government policy proposals was assumed to illuminate the way government inadvertently perpetuated gendered social arrangements. A gendered analysis
brought society and governments under a critical lens and urged society and government to act. The lens analogy also proposed that social arrangements were broadly the result of government’s attempt to serve the majority or mainstream. A *Gender Lens* brought into view the realities and experiences of women in relation to the policy or social problem being analyzed. The ‘Lens’ invited bureaucrats to “open their minds” to issues affecting women and the Lens also gave a reading list to promote the “understanding of gender difference in society” (41). The critical perspective reflected the intention of the drafters to raise awareness, with an assumption of the best intentions of government actors.

Women make up approximately 50.3% of BC’s population – yet they do not share equally in the benefits of BC society. This is because our social, economic and political structures were designed by men – most often white, middle class men…Systemic discrimination – is pervasive in our society. In fact, it is so much part of our ‘landscape’ that it is easy to miss. Gender-inclusive analysis…will help you to see its impacts (6-7).

The *Gender Lens* was explicitly critical in its understanding of gender bias and the status of women in BC within an institutionalized context. The *Gender Lens* also provides powerful evidence of the degree in which a critical feminist perspective had been integrated into government structures (see Teghtsoonian 2000).

**Conclusion**

Gender had found its way into government policy, and reflected the demands of feminist claims on society and government to address the status of women as a policy problem. The success of the women’s movement in articulating the ‘status of women’ as the central basis of its claims had contributed to its political salience and the degree of
government engagement with gender as an aspect of social policy. These successes are linked to the women’s movement’s capacity to articulate a critical perspective of society that had brought women’s inequality into public awareness. Through the use of a feminist critical perspective as an underpinning for diverse feminisms, gender was successfully politicized and seen as relevant to society and governments as a basis of claims.
Chapter 2: Cracking the gender lens

In 2007, the work of Status of Women Canada (SWC) and the Federal Plan on Gender Equality (2005) is not readily apparent in most of the actual policy directions of government. Changes in the SWC Women’s Program mandate point to a phenomenon that avoids a scrutiny on society and a reduction of government responsibility for alleviating gender inequalities. The previous SWC Women’s Program mandate included the phrase “...to support action by women's organizations and other partners seeking to advance equality for women by addressing women's economic, social, political and legal situation (SWC 2006, emphasis added). The Women’s Program mandate from the SWC Website now reads “...to facilitate women’s participation in Canadian society by addressing their economic, social and cultural situation through Canadian organizations” (emphasis added, 2007). The shift in discourse demonstrates a change in the way individuals are to engage with governments and reciprocally, how governments respond to group claims. It is as though in the public political discourse, women are equal enough.

The success of the women’s movement to articulate a social analysis on the basis of gender can be measurable by the responsiveness of government to women’s claims. Even more significant is the evolution in policy documents from an early focus on ‘women’s issues’ to ‘gender equality’ as the basis for government policy, and the policy frame for articulating the problem (see Carol Bacchi 1999). Policy frame analysis is an approach to understanding the manner in which a social phenomenon is identified as a problem or is ‘problematized’ in policy proposals. Mieke Verloo describes the research undertaken by MAGEEQ, a group of academic researchers which “analyzed divergences in policy frames around gender equality’ in the EU (2004: 1). The definition of the problem or
policy framing is in itself ‘highly political’ with built in assumptions that answer questions such as “what is the problem, where is it located, who is responsible, who has voice in defining the problem or suggesting solutions, and what is the solution” (Verloo 2004: 9). In comparing the “diversity in interpretations of gender inequality in six countries at the EU level,” MAGEEQ has sought to illuminate the relationship between institutionalized gender discourse and policy outcomes (2004: 4).

The integration of the concept of ‘women’s equality’ within state structures in Canada is important as a measure of the degree that government and society embraced feminist definitions of the problem of the status of women. By doing so, government implicitly accepted that social arrangements are unfairly hierarchical and that addressing imbalances are important social aims. In extending the problem to scrutiny of its own public service in employment equity initiatives, Canada’s government implied acceptance that inequality is produced or reinforced through social institutions and structures. For close to twenty five years, a critical perspective was taken up by the Canadian government and defined in government policy with ‘inequality’ as the problem. ‘Women’s inequality’ was both readily articulated and subliminally accepted as the basis for government initiatives related to women.

The discourse related to women’s status and inequality and its integration into the bureaucratic structures in Canada greatly influenced feminist strategy and success. The acceptance of ‘status of women’ as a policy problem created an array of political opportunities for feminists to engage with the state as a means for social change. Louise Chappell (2002) in her comparative study between Australia and Canada describes the significance of examining “political opportunity structures (POS)” (Tarrow 1998 in
Chappell 2002) or the points of access, political actors, and procedures that “provide incentive for collective action by affecting people’s expectations for success or failure” (9). Chappell describes the engagement of feminists with the state in discursive terms, characterized as a “two way street in which feminists in Canada have shaped political opportunity structures and POS have shaped strategic choices”(4). In her view, an explanation of ideology [liberal feminism] cannot explain the diversity of feminists that have made use of state engagement as a means to forward feminist goals. POS in institutions have contributed greatly to the degree that Canadian feminists have engaged with the state and utilized strategies that relied on the state (4).

The feminist social movement in English Canada has used femocrat and legal strategies to seek change and has gained political strength and an ear from institutions. Feminists have used a critical perspective and a social analysis of women’s inequality, and have become increasingly more academic and legal in their arguments as a result of opportunities offered by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. For example, in the Supreme Court of Canada’s acceptance of a ‘substantive’ definition of equality in measuring section 15 equality claims, legal feminists were successful in asking the courts to use an institutional or systemic analysis of equality in Canada (Hurley 1995: 2). This ‘framing’ of equality within the premise that society produces hierarchical arrangements that might benefit or reflect the realities of some people more than others, laid the groundwork for feminists to use the Charter to address women’s inequality in Canada. The feminist gender perspective has consistently formed a critical approach that has the following features:

- It identifies structural inequalities embedded in social norms, relationships and institutions.
It reveals how social categories such as gender regulate social positions and benefits within society.
It articulates a set of fair and just arrangements and promotes an improved condition for women overall.

Political language related to the ‘status’ of women emerged in BC politics throughout the 1970’s and continued into the 1990’s. The femocrat strategy, which Chappell identifies as “the entry of feminists into the public service to advance the cause of women, and whose responsibilities were defined in this manner” (2002: 84) assumes a bureaucracy open to women’s equality discourse. In BC, there are early indicators of an acceptance of ‘the status of women’ as a policy problem within government. In 1984, the BC Social Credit Ministry of Labour ‘Women’s Programs’ Report “highlights changes in women’s demographic and social characteristics, education and labour force activity…to provide a broad overview of the status of women…” over the last decade (1, emphasis added). The statistics presented in the Report were implicitly understood as indicators of women’s status and inequality and had been charted for ten years to provide comparisons. A number of Ministries in the BC Government began to address gender within its public service and produce reports that looked at gender bias and the impact of its policies on women. For example, the 1991 document called Gender Neutral Language produced by the Province of BC, provided guidelines to remove “gender bias from all government communications(2),” and stated that “sexual stereotyping, demeaning references and words that exclude women are still found in everyday speech and in workplace communications. In order to truly be equal, women must be seen and heard to be equal” (3).
State feminism, that is the integration of a feminist critical perspective into state structures during these decades can be attributed partly to the integration of ‘the status of women’ into the public discourse. The capacity to maintain a public discourse speaks to the sophistication of the feminist lobby on society, government and the courts and its capacity to articulate a critical perspective on gender in the social context.

**Cracking the lens in BC**

Given the degree of institutionalization of gender in the BC case, the current situation is astounding. The gender lens, as it refers to a critical perspective of society based on the category of gender (and reflected in the BC Government’s own *Gender Lens* 1993) is not only ‘cracked’ but is shattered to incapacity as a legitimate analytic tool for understanding social problems affecting women. With precursors of a shift in discourse (the first cracks) in the middle 1990’s, since the election in 2001 of a conservative-leaning Liberal party in BC, a gender analysis has all been erased from political discourses and is seriously weakened as a basis of claims on government. One of the most symbolic examples of the ‘cracking of the gender lens’ in BC is the end of the stand-alone Ministry of Women’s Equality and the shift of women’s services to a department of Community Services (Ministry of Community Services 2007).

In 2001, the newly elected Liberal government engaged in significant restructuring and a reduction in spending to social programs. The cuts in funding to a range of programs such as daycare subsidy, income assistance, and legal aid, and the restructuring of public sector unions have been identified by numerous scholars decrying the Liberal economic agenda as harmful to women (Creese and Strong Boag 2005: 1).
significance beyond a cost-cutting direction of government, is the elimination of the language of ‘women’s equality’ or ‘status of women’ from policy frames and government structures. The loss of funding to women’s centres in BC is directly related to its role of furthering women’s equality through both services and advocacy. Creese and Strong Boag (2005) argue that “at one stroke, one half of the province’s citizens lost a critical platform for advocacy” (30).

In spite of the strongly worded censure of the Liberal Government’s agenda, the feminist reaction to government cuts did not strongly resonate with the BC public. An article from the *Langley Advance News* in 2003 entitled ‘Poor Choices Create Inequality’ quoted the Minister of State for Women’s Services, Lynn Stephens, who took the position that society has achieved an equality of opportunity and access. In this view, the responsibility for inequality rests firmly on the shoulders of the individual. The Minister’s comments were cited by feminists as a denial of women’s inequality but produced a limited public reaction to her words. A general belief appears to exist in BC that equality is essentially assured in institutions and that the individual is to make use of opportunities and make good choices.

In addition, there has been little public support for women centres. Women Centres lost funding in BC in 2004 and those who protested the cuts were often characterized in the media as radical and extremist. The *Times Colonist* reported the Minister as saying; “A lot of the difficulty seems to be that they (Women’s Centres) don’t want to lose the feminist-based service delivery model. They don’t want to move to the more mainstream service delivery model so there are problems” (2003: A5). Feminist service delivery has been equated with ‘special interests’ and is implicated as too ‘political’ (see REAL
Women Canada 2007). In 2004, with funding set to end at the end of March, the BC Coalition of Women’s Centres put a News Release on their website stating that “the Coalition has conceded the advocacy and political action services they provide that has been seen as so problematic for this government” (BC Coalition 2006). Despite repeated attempts to meet with the Ministers for their policy sector, meetings have been sporadic and subject to stipulations for content and time frame. Using ‘sit in’ strategies of refusing to leave the legislature, the representatives of the Coalition invoked little sympathy and rallying of public support in the media when they have been arrested.

Another indication that gender seems to have lost salience with the general public is a tone in the media that feminism has gone ‘too far’. For example Christine Blatchford of the Globe and Mail, was censured by few readers for using gendered language in calling Belinda Stronach a ‘political whore’ for crossing the floor in the House of Commons. She responded in her ‘comment’ by saying ‘who you calling sexist, buster?’ and although she apologized for her ‘gendered outrage’, her tone indicated that the criticism was an example of over-sensitivity to language (May 21, 2005: A15). In the same edition, a BC inmate of the Kamloops Correctional Centre is reported to have registered a complaint of sex discrimination with the Human Rights tribunal that the BC prison system was discriminatory to males (because women have better services, conditions etc.) (S3). In the Province Opinion section on December 24, 2004, the Human Rights Tribunal also received a sex discrimination complaint from a man who was refused membership in a women’s-only gym. He was quoted as saying; “It’s getting to the point where men have to push back a bit” (A29).
Teghtsoonian points out that “governments pursuing a neoliberal agenda have often displayed hostility to women’s policy agencies…and frame feminists…as the illegitimate and unrepresentative expression of special interests” (2004: 29). What is more difficult to understand is a perceived loss of public support for women’s equality claims, giving governments significant latitude to step back from initiatives designed to address the status of women in BC. More than just backlash, the public tolerance for anti-feminist comments and a public opinion that women’s equality claims seem to have reached a limit, provide few constraints to what has become a shift in discourse away from the status of women in BC.

**Conclusion**

The success of the women’s movement to articulate a critical perspective of gender in the social context or a ‘gender lens’ has led to the institutionalization of ‘women’s equality’ and ‘the status of women’ as a basis of government policy in the last decades. The discourse related to the ‘status of women’ has successfully politicized gender and created an array of ‘political opportunities’ for feminists to advance the cause of equality for women in English Canada. As I trace in this chapter, a shift in political discourse has resulted in the current situation in 2007, in which gender as a political category has become seriously weakened as the basis of gender claims to governments and society. The loss of the Ministry of Women’s Equality and the use of the *Gender Lens* as a policy tool has been replaced by narrow set of women’s programs. The department for women’s programs in 2007, focuses on individuals and their capacity to make good choices in a society of equality of opportunity and access. There has been
little public reaction to the shift in political discourse away from gender equality claims to the increasing focus on the individual. The social and political discourse of 2007 appears resistant to the use of gender as a political category for a number of reasons that will be explored in the following chapters.
Chapter 3: Gender as a problematic category

In 2007, gender has become problematic as a basis to frame political claims and is noticeable in its absence in public political discourse in English Canada. Many examples provide evidence that the position of women in Canadian society has likely reached a plateau and may even be entering a backslide. Trimble and Arscott state that the women’s movement’s emphasis on “firsts;” i.e. -the first MLA, the first Prime Minister, the first Supreme Court judge - has obscured how gains for women socially, politically and economically have reached a standstill (2003) and also obscures how gains for women do not represent gains for all women equally. For example, on the CBC Canada website on February 6, 2006, it was noted that the new Harper Cabinet has fewer women (about 22% of the new 27 member Tory government) than the previous government. The percentage of women in Cabinet points to a trend of decreases in women’s political representation in Canadian Parliament over the last consecutive mandates (Trimble and Arscott 2003). The movement for women’s equality in English Canada appears to have reached a ‘glass ceiling’ and the political shortfall of women in parliament is only briefly acknowledged in the news media and no analysis is offered. On the Conservative Party’s website there is no mention of women as having distinct needs or different status in Canadian society. Rather, the focus of our Conservative Canadian government is toward “Mainstream Canadians – hardworking people who pay their taxes and play by the rules” (CBC Canada Website 2006).

What is the phenomenon that has made gender a difficult category to use as a basis of claims on government and society? How has gender inequality become a ‘privatized’ characteristic of individuals rather than a ‘public’ concern to governments?
One explanation for the loss of momentum in the women’s equality movement within bureaucratic structures has been identified in the first of four Reports; the *Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women* tabled in the House of Commons. The *Report of the Parliamentary Committee* in 2004 points to economic changes cited by women’s groups as one of the primary reasons for the lack of a gender analysis in government.

The Committee heard that the move from core funding of women’s organizations toward project funding in the 1990s had made it difficult to sustain a women’s movement in Canada and made it increasingly difficult for the women’s movement to advocate for greater equality between women and men (Standing Committee 2005).

Other economic causes for a de-politicization of women’s claims are related to connections between the women’s movement and the welfare state made in Andrew (1984) and Evans and Wekerle (1997). These authors and others reinforce a link between the de-politicization of gender and economic changes by associating the cost of social programs with improving the conditions of women’s lives. With a strong association between status of women claims and social reform, it is apparent that women’s equality is seen as expensive. Many of the organizations dedicated to addressing gender inequality have had funding decreased. Social programs identified as part of the women’s policy sector have been restructured, reduced, and removed. In the past years, Status of Women Canada (SWC) for example has seen reductions and stagnation in funding allocated to Women’s Programs in the branch committed to providing grants to organizations engaged in initiatives consistent with ‘status of women’ goals. Economic reasons such as budget reductions in the 1990’s, funding cuts and the shifts to the Canadian Health and
Social Transfer (CHST) funding to provinces, provides some answers for the decrease in salience in gender as a political category (Day and Brodsky 1998).

However, economic reasons alone cannot explain the reluctance of young women to identify themselves as feminists or explain the cynicism of media coverage toward gender claims. Cries of bias are voiced regularly through BC media in response to any compensatory measures made by government on women’s behalf (Boere 2005). Explored in the last chapter is the particularly compelling BC example, in which institutional recognition of women’s equality has been weakened by the replacement of the Ministry of Women’s Equality with a narrow set of women’s services (Creese and Strong-Boag 2005). This institutional disempowerment is accompanied by a number of theoretical blows to ‘gender’ which impact political discourse and raise doubts even amongst committed feminists about the usefulness of the category ‘women’ in their bid for political equality. These theoretical blows have contributed to a shift in the discourse which both reflects and reinforces the de-politicization of gender. These blows have also created significant diversion from a sustained critical analysis on society and points to a shift in the nature of a feminist critical perspective on gender in the social context.

Problems encountered with the category of gender

Gender as a category is less frequently used in political claims and is often seen as problematic in political philosophies. Theoretical problems associated with the category of gender have contributed to a shift away from a gender analysis in policy formation in many areas of government. Although these problems must be addressed in order to move forward, the problems associated with gender have left the discourse vulnerable to the
increasing neoliberal agendas of government and the tendency to avoid a critical perspective on society. As the state turns away from gender claims, feminists are increasingly challenged to find ways to conceptualize gender that may hold weight in support of claims to government. In feminist and political theory, gender is challenged in theory and practice as a category that is difficult to utilize as a basis of group claims. Three types of problems associated with gender present challenges for theory and create problems for those engaged in feminist practice and community activism. These problems are broadly described as follows:

- The unity of the category ‘women’
- The creation of gender dilemmas
- The victim problem

**The unity of the category ‘women’**

The first of these problems is associated with identifying women as a distinct and unitary group or as a collectivity with similar experiences. To a great degree, making gender political, or in other words identifying how gender is relevant to political discourse starts analytically with the proposition that society is already structured along gender lines. For gender to be successful as a basis of political claims, a common and similar set of social experiences must exist based on one’s sex designation as male or female. The assumption must be that being male or female contributes to a recognizable pattern of allocation of benefits, burdens, goods, status and social power. A social structuring process must be identifiable in society in which the differences between women become homogenized and patterns exhibit disproportionate outcomes for the group not explicable by other causes. The consciousness-raising element of this awareness, in which such patterns of disproportionality are ‘discovered’ within society, is
a recognition of social structuring based on blunt yet discrete categories. Group unity based on perceived commonalities and belonging may pre-exist such a discovery but becomes political when the group identity is used as a basis of claims on society. At times the awareness of unequal social structures heightens an emphasis on shared characteristics, first as a means of illuminating the basis of systemic discrimination and inequality, second to facilitate organizing, and third to reframe ascriptive attributes seen as negative, disadvantaging or maligning into positive terms (Butler 1998).

For example, the maternal and cultural feminist movements and the ‘different but equal’ approaches to feminism address the absence of women from culture and history (Eisenstein 1983). The invisibility of women’s perspectives and their exclusion from education, science, research, politics, business, and technology is lamented as a missing piece and is seen as the other part of the puzzle to complement the contribution of men. Differences are heightened and reclaimed as those characteristics seen as ‘female’ are recast as positive and important for the well being of society (Gilligan 1982).

The identification of ‘women’ as a basis of systemic discrimination and unequal benefit and status becomes problematic for feminism in what LEAF (2001: 8) calls ‘a hardening of the categories’ in which a group identity becomes fixed, setting the boundary for inclusion and exclusion. In the first of two versions of this problem, the category ‘women’ is seen as defined by both biology and social construction, forming a dichotomy of ‘male and female.’ This version fails to account for the sex continuum of gender.

In more practical terms, the problem has arisen in terms of the need to carve out ‘women only’ spaces. ‘Women-centered’ organizations are considered a necessary
political strategy for organizing and for providing safe harbour for those experiencing impact from male abuse and dominance. Vancouver Rape Relief, an antiviolence organization of women for women based in Vancouver, found itself in a theoretical conundrum when confronted by the request of Kimberley Nixon, a male-to-female trans woman interested in volunteering for the organization. When Nixon was denied the opportunity to volunteer based on the assessment that she had once lived as a man, she was seen as not constitutive of the category ‘women’ as defined by the group. Although Nixon is female post-surgery in her sex designation, Rape Relief saw the category ‘women’ as socially constructed in a context of male privilege and dominance. Membership in the category ‘women’ for Rape Relief involved a lifetime of socialization and oppression born as a girl and emerging as a woman. Therefore, the work of Rape Relief; i.e. providing support to survivors of abuse or violence, was understood by the agency to be both therapeutic and political. Their analysis of violence against women was intricately tied to women’s status in society (Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief Society [2002]). However, in this case, the category ‘women’ becomes problematic when a simple sex dichotomy of male and female cannot be defended by the group, or is used as a basis of deciding who is oppressed through gender and who is not.

The argument that women are oppressed in a particular and recognizable way by virtue of their identity as female is also difficult to sustain in light of complex heterogeneity within the group. In the second version of this same problem, the category ‘women’ has also been challenged as privileging a perspective that reflects white, heterosexual, middle class, western women and fails to account for differences and power differentials between women (see Mohanty 1998 in Lewis and Mills). The problem arises
out of the push to identify gender as the primary and universal category of oppression as opposed to a category intersected by other forms. For only a minority of women can gender be considered the primary category of oppression and the only basis for exclusion to political, legal and social arenas. For most women, gender is intersected or multiply compounded with other forms of oppression through colonialism, race, class, sexual orientation, and ability. A focus on gender risks essentializing and homogenizing ‘women’ as a group (Narayan 2000).

This problem also arises from the representation that sex oppression and the nature of women’s experience as an oppressed group is universal and fixed within society. Women are seen as similarly oppressed for features that are collectively shared, in what Mohanty calls “a universal patriarchal framework” (1998: 51). The most frequent criticism of feminism today is based on problems with the category ‘women,’ in particular, how the framework and activism of the western women’s movement has reflected the ideas and objectives of a privileged subset of women. In receipt of these most pointed critiques, feminism has been challenged to make visible its own racism, classism, heterosexism and other forms of bias (Rebick 2005: 135-139). This issue has confounded the women’s movement and created division in its ranks. For example, a dispute along these lines erupted at a Conference called ‘Women in Violent Society’ held in Banff on May 9-12, 1991. Speakers included Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millet, Sandra Butler and others. On the evening of May 11 during the dinner break, Nadine Elliot took the microphone and began to speak of her “isolation as a black woman that she and other women were feeling at the conference.” Someone called out from the room “…fuck the issues and let’s get on with the party…” and Nadine abruptly left the podium.
Women in the room began to chant “...give women of colour the mike...” and Nadine returned to the podium to say “Justice is not justice...if the women’s movement continues to tokenize us...or until we are equally represented at these conferences.” The next day Rosemary Brown opened the plenary by addressing “last night’s crisis” and invoked women “to examine the accusation when it is leveled at ourselves” (BWSS 1991).

For activists the accusation of bias hit hard. Feminist agendas, which had been set to challenge power structures and systems of oppression, were being accused of perpetuating oppression through racial hierarchies and representations that advanced the perspectives of a privileged few. The feminist movement found itself in contradiction with its own stated aims and objectives. Out of fear of diluting the claims of gender or of dividing the strength of their collective voice, many feminists initially resisted demands to re-examine political strategy. For NAC, the National Action Committee identified as the ‘parliament of women’, the rift between groups almost led to its dissolution (Vickers et al 1993).

The creation of gender dilemmas

The second type of conceptual problems associated with gender claims arise in the form of dilemmas that posit gender as oppositional to other claims and rights, contrary to social aims or contradictory to freedoms. Dilemmas are identified when gender is used as a basis of claims and are then used as the reason for not attending to equality claims made by women. Gender is frequently counterposed to cost, cultural equality, economic equality, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression. Dilemmas of gender are
particularly hard to resolve and frequently result in women’s equality arguments being stalemate or recast in non-gendered terms.

Examples of dilemmas include the type of problem identified by Nancy Fraser. Fraser is concerned that “group identity supplants class interest (1997: 11)” and she argues that social movements that focus on recognition claims do so at a cost to furthering material equality for disadvantaged groups. For example, Fraser identifies gender as a ‘bivalent’ mode of collectivity in that both redistributive and recognition arguments have salience within the feminist or women’s movement, and have been used to further goals (11). Fraser states that such bivalent collectivities experience inequality both through exploitation in which the group is exploited for its productivity, and by misrecognition in which it is devalued or demeaned in society. These two claims are different in both grounds and in remedy and potentially run at counter purposes to each other. The collectivity lands firmly on the horns of a dilemma.

In addition, Fraser’s argument warns that a societal aim for redistribution may be thwarted or diverted by claims of recognition. For Fraser, the focus on group membership and identity obscures how goods and benefits are distributed through society. Recognition claims are based on a group’s experience of value within society or of their recognition within societal structures and institutions. The group may be partially formed through misrecognition by the dominant group, as an identity may be maligned and placed outside of social norms and relegated to limited sub-spheres of society (see also Taylor 1992). The formation of a group as political is often in part, a reaction to its social context. For Fraser, the claims for recognition shift a social focus from economic inequality to an increasing demand for the accommodation of groups into social
structures or group rights. With the increased focus on the accommodation of groups, overall economic or distributive justice is undermined as a social objective (69).

In an example of this dilemma, women are posing contradictory claims for recognition of difference as a group and on the other hand, economic equality or equal treatment. In January 2004, the city of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island sought to initiate a policy of cross-gender guarding in their holding cells, in which female inmates could be guarded and monitored by male guards (Nanaimo CGM Brief 2004). Women raised concerns related to harms experienced by women when monitored by men, given the social context in which female bodies are frequently sexualized and commodified in society. Prior to this proposed change in policy, the city had maintained a roster of female guards that were called to work if a female was arrested and held in city cells. Segregated guarding is a means of recognizing the different impact that incarceration has on women and men.

Yet, in a step toward economic equality for women, Corrections Canada had adopted a gender neutral approach to hiring for most positions to allow entry of women as employees into correctional institutions (Correctional Service of Canada 1998). In the case of city cells in Nanaimo, the need for employment equity arises because a gender specific approach to guarding meant women were always relegated to part-time hours available through on-call rosters. The disproportionate number of male to female inmates held in cells meant that full time or even consistent employment for female guards in city cells could not be sustained. In using a recognition claim, women inmates made demands to be treated differently within a given institution (i.e. to receive segregated guarding because of the impact of male guarding on them) while women guards demanded to be
treated the same as male guards (i.e. to have equal access to employment in a sex segregated workplace). For Fraser, the critique of ‘women’ putting forward contradictory claims for recognition and redistribution, extends to the broader problem of using gender as a recognition claim and obscuring the broader structuring of society by class (1997). Thus, the argument also includes a disagreement in strategies in addressing systemic inequality in society and which category of oppression, class or gender, has primacy. The pursuit of either social aim can make obscure, retard or make invisible the other.

Another example of a type of dilemma difficult to resolve for gender claims is the cultural justice-sexual equality debate. Women within a cultural community may identify with cultural interpretations of their social role that contradict the ideal of gender equality prescribed in dominant Canadian society. For example, policy focused toward domestic violence against immigrant women in BC is often framed as though these women are challenged by western interpretations of women’s role in the family. For example, in response to three serious assaults on Indo Canadian women in 2006 by their spouses, BC Attorney General was quoted as saying, “…there is deeply rooted inequity ingrained in South Asian culture…violence is an insidious part…”(CTV Canada 2007). The dilemma is often framed as though western interpretations of relationships framed by individual rights and freedoms make it easier for western women to have egalitarian relationships and leave abusive relationships. These western interpretations of relationships are contradicted by a set of priorities for immigrant women emerging out of their cultural identities and responsibilities. In violence against women and diversity discourses, immigrant women are seen as constricted by cultural rules about relationships and face barriers to leaving an abusive relationship (CBC Canada 2007). The implication that
‘white’ or ‘Canadian’ women are culture free and not similarly constrained fails to
account for real difficulties for all women within abusive relationships and obscures how
all women’s roles within families are laden with cultural and religious meaning. An
aspect of culture and religion is to engage in gendering and to assign meanings to gender
within the social context. Posed as a dilemma, these embedded concepts are seen as
oppositional and almost impossible to resolve.

Okin (1999) frames the problem in terms of the question ‘Is multiculturalism bad
for women?’ The Canadian discourse on multiculturalism is closely linked to the
difficulty in posing gender claims as cross cultural. There is acceptance that cultures
express gender differently and that these representations are intrinsically connected to a
group’s right to culture within Canadian society. One consequence of these debates is that
equality is seen as culture specific. Culture is often posed as a possession or right of the
individual to pursue in the privacy of their lives. A gender claim that calls to question a
cultural practice is highly suspect and often interpreted as racist or biased. Canadian
tolerance of cultural practices is therefore strongly connected to Canadian tolerance for
women’s inequality in society, because of the tendency to see the expression of gender as
tied to an individual’s cultural and religious affiliations.

One version of this dilemma is present in the controversy surrounding the
community Bountiful in Creston, BC (CBC Canada 2003). Women in the community
appear to live in polygamous marriage by consent, choosing to participate in family
relationships opposed to conventional definitions of marriage and family. For women
outside the community, it is difficult not to interpret a ‘male with multiple wives’
relationship as exploitive. The relationship in appearance creates a patriarchal framework
that ensures significant benefits for the male ‘head of household.’ With the capacity for increased progeny, the father can enhance his communal influence and increase his economic standing by the shared efforts of family members in the household. These cases give rise to the following question: how can feminists alleviate the subordinate status of women in society if the feminist definition of equality impedes women from choosing freely their group identities and personal relationships, including those in which they choose subordinated roles?

The final example of dilemmas is the counterposition of a traditional or conventional feminist position related to pornography with a freedom of expression argument. In this dilemma, it is understood that women’s status or social experience is affected by harms from the production and consumption of pornography. The traditional feminist claim is seen as oppositional to the freedom of individuals to express sexuality in private. The gender claim is also interpreted as regulating sexuality and prescribing definitions of acceptable and taboo sexual behaviour. Seen as inordinately regulatory, conservative and limiting, the traditional claims are negated or questioned by men and women alike (Boyd 2004).

This feminist standpoint, in which male-female sexual relationships are politicized and understood in the context of broad social meanings of dominance and power, has stimulated strong backlash. What I call ‘the critical view’ of gender in social context, considers the social meanings attached to male-female relationships and its relationship to social controls that produce and maintain hegemonic masculinity and the norm of heterosexuality. Conversely, the ‘privatized’ view is concerned primarily about the limiting or restricting certain individual sexual acts and infringing individual rights.
Artificially posed as a dilemma, the ‘critical view’ draws into question the rights of individuals and creates an either-or situation that belies the complexity of the issue. For example, in the case of the bookstore Little Sisters, sexually explicit gay and lesbian publications were prevented from crossing the border, having been labeled ‘obscene’ by customs officials (Little Sisters v. Canada Minister of Justice [2000]). As an unintended outcome of the legislation which protects vulnerable people, homosexual material was automatically interpreted as ‘obscene.’

The critical view of gender invites social questioning and is concerned with context, the social relationships of those who are engaged, and the social meanings attached to the activity. In contrast, a ‘privatized’ view sees the use of pornography and sexual relationships as a private activity, with the definition of harms isolated to the individuals involved. This dilemma and the others discussed above, place feminist goals in a position contrary to another equally or more important societal goal and tends to involve a limited interpretation of the feminist critical view. My intention is not to say that dilemmas are not difficult and not important to resolve. In addition, the label of feminist should not be taken to mean that a traditional feminism should be the basis of further understanding of these dilemmas. Instead, it is useful to identify that although dilemmas are difficult to resolve, the discourse frames the problem within a ‘privatized’ discourse. Feminist goals are counterposed in oppositional terms with a liberal value as though they exist in mutual exclusion of each other, with one goal supplanting the pursuit of the other. When placed analytically in this framework, the dilemma is especially provocative when one of the values is highly prized in western liberal society. In this
way, healthy and important debates create weaknesses in the framework that sustains a critical perspective on the social context.

**A resistance to social critique/ or the victim problem**

A third type of problem associated with gender echoes the last example and is seen in the general resistance toward explanations that use a sociological perspective of women’s status and inequality. A social critique is seen as deterministic and as negating women’s agency and minimizing the ability of women to surpass obstacles and improve the conditions of their lives (see Gotell 1998; Boyd 2004). Gender inequality claims are interpreted as infantilizing women and creating an exaggerated construct of victimization that does not reflect many women’s experience of opportunities available in society. This language of victimization emerges partly from the strategy of the English Canadian women’s movement to make the link between violence and women’s status. As a “tool of oppression” (Young 1990), violence has been identified by feminists as a contributing factor to women’s subordinate position in society. Many young women are reluctant to identify as feminists for this reason, perceiving society as having achieved equality of opportunity and access and unwilling to see themselves as victims. Women’s claims of abuse, violence or oppression within relationships meet strong opposition and an accusation of exaggerating divisions between men and women and creating bias toward men (See Neil Boyd 2004).

Feminists have faced considerable difficulty in sustaining the analysis that society is structured along gender lines in ways that disadvantage and harm women as a group. The recast of the ‘violence against women’ analysis for example by government, has been to
avoid the discussion about social inequality and instead to focus on violence as a problem occurring to some individual people. In the recast of this issue, as will be explored in the next chapter, violence is understood as located within individuals as an expression of natural human emotion taken to extremes. The perpetrator is seen as exhibiting lack of self control and the victim is seen as lacking in autonomy. The victim allows violence and subsequent harms or effect, and the perpetrator allows the expression of extremes in behavior. Violence occurs then for flawed or developmentally immature individuals or for those engaged in deviant lifestyles. Violence is not seen as a condition of society, created within social relationships or understood in particular ways as a means to sustain patterns of allocation and power. Even in acknowledgements of numbers and a disproportionate burden of violence carried by women, the problem is approached through skill building and developing individual capacities to ‘stop the violence’ (Ministry of Women’s Equality 1992; 1993; Ministry of Community Services 2007/08).

The problem is also created in the characterization of women as victims or disadvantaged in a context in which equality of opportunity and access is seen by most people as available. It is difficult for people to identify their advantages or privileges as emerging out of social structures or other advantages not related to their own efforts (Young 1990; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In a liberal social context, people are understood to do well by their own capacities and efforts, not through determinants created through the accident of birth. People are seen as reaping the benefits or weathering the consequences of choices, and as capable of creating for themselves the conditions of life that reflect their own capacities and choosing. A social analysis of women’s status is thus difficult to sustain if the dominant understanding does not
accommodate the view that inequality is embedded within social structures, rather than individual circumstances. In a society of equal opportunity and choice, women are seen as lacking something internally and individually, not structurally or as a group. In a society structured in a pattern in which some people have better chances than others, individuals may be unable to respond or do well, or make use of opportunities in spite of skills or their own best efforts.

The focus on women’s position and violence as occurring because of factors internal to individuals, limits the potential of a more expansive theorizing of violence as gendered and violence having particular links to what it means to be male and female in society. On the one hand, the masculinization of violence and its associations to power, self efficacy and status and on the other hand, the feminization of victims as passive, weak and powerless, reinforces gendering patterns of what it means to be male and female. Violence as gendered is rarely recognized for its role as social constraint or as a method of social control to reinforce hierarchies or norms. Instead, social analyses are accused of implying causal relationships that fail to account for human variations in responses to social conditions. Although, women’s status is often linked to an accumulation of the effects of violence and to constraints arising from the risk of violence against women in society, neither are broadly accepted as true. Neither is palatable for women, who want to resist the conclusion that violence or abuse has controlled any particular outcome or capacity for their lives.
Conclusion

Problems related to gender as described in this chapter, has presented challenges to feminists to find ways to address problems and present their claims to government. The case examples provide real life challenges for feminists grappling with practical issues as they occur. Gender is seen as problematic, including the problem of the category ‘women’, the creation of gender dilemmas, and the victim problem, and point to serious difficulties that have yet to be resolved, and have weakened the capacity to maintain a critical perspective on the social context. The theoretical debates presented in this section also serve as an undercurrent below a policy process, in which governments move away from status of women claims. In the absence of a critical perspective, gender is de-politicized.
Chapter 4: Creating a parallel discourse to women’s equality

With the acceptance of ‘women’s status’ as a focus of government for so many years, the shift away from the critical view of gender in the social context should have led to significant feminist outcry. However, feminists have been immersed in an increasingly individualized legal and bureaucratic framework and sufficiently diverted by problems associated with gender. When political opportunities are structured within legal and state frameworks, the discourse is limited in its capacity to maintain its critical perspective. For example, van Beveren and Verloo describe a phenomenon in which employment policy focused toward women, gradually shifted meaning from promoting gender equality in the labour market to correcting problems experienced by ‘working women,’ as the policy became incorporated in the European Employment Strategy of the 1990’s (2004: 2). Similarly, the concept of women’s equality and status of women in English Canada and BC has shifted meaning in a manner reflected in the European case. Verloo explains this phenomenon in her research on policy frames and describes how when government and institutions take up gender equality as a policy area, there is frequently the “creation of a parallel policy discourse” in which “contradictory and counterproductive frames can be detected” that may run counter to women’s equality claims. It is through using policy frame analysis that the shift away from gender can be identified to the point of the present, in which gender equality as a part of political discourse has virtually “faded away” (italics added, 20). The creation of a parallel policy discourse has certain features that contribute to a de-politicization of equality claims. Frequently, the parallel discourse involves the reframing of the critical social perspective to an approach that places emphasis on the individual.
To characterize the de-politicization of gender as a shift in social discourse is to examine how the policy frames of ‘women’s equality’ and ‘status of women’ is now articulated as policy for ‘women’s issues’ or ‘problems experienced by women’. The parallel discourse recasts the issues put forward by feminists from within a critical perspective on the social context, to a policy frame that emphasizes the individual and his or her capacity to make use of opportunities and make their own best life. If the feminist gender perspective has formed a critical approach that has the following features:

- It identifies structural inequalities embedded in social norms, relationships and institutions.
- It reveals how social categories such as gender regulate social positions and benefits within society.
- It articulates a set of fair and just arrangements and promotes an improved condition for women overall.

Then the shift that has occurred in framing a parallel discourse exhibits the following contrary qualities:

- It is primarily focused on the individual in a society that promotes equal (the same) application of rules and a fair distribution of goods.
- It places an emphasis on the individual to be self sufficient, make use of equal opportunities and social benefits based on a capacity to mitigate an array of social risks.
- It emphasizes that social wellbeing is a result of the well being and social contribution of aggregate individuals, the reduction of risk, the promotion of opportunities and the assurance of equal access.

**Domestic violence as a parallel frame**

As an example of parallel discourse, the anti violence sector has used domestic violence as an indicator of women’s subordinate status in society. Over the years violence against women has continued to be a focus of study and is seen as evidence by feminists of women’s inequality in Canadian society (Gotell 1998). The substance of this discourse
or policy frame has shifted from using the problem as evidence of women’s inequality to an emphasis on the problem itself.

One mechanism for the shift in emphasis, results from the lack of a sustained connection between the problem and women’s equality. For example, the violence against women factor as a feature of women’s inequality, has been compelling in its content and in its public salience. Violence against women has been increasingly characterized and examined as both a cause and effect of women’s inequality. By identifying violence against women as a cause of women’s inequality, the emphasis is on the violence and implies that policy must focus on decreasing violence against women to make women more equal with men. The social problem becomes the focus and solutions that are remedial and corrective are directed at the individual. Conversely, if seen as an effect of women’s inequality, the definition of the problem is located in the social and institutional factors that perpetuate inequality. For example, women’s historic economic inequality in society and financial dependence on men is seen as a prior condition for male dominance and the potential of violence in families. Violence against women should decrease in the pursuit of broader goals related to women’s equality. This work is a product of a critical perspective in which society and social structures are the object of study and action.

The two ways of conceptualizing the problem as both cause and effect, can be seen in Assessing Violence against Women, a Report prepared by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women (2002). In the Report, the problem of violence against women is first a cause of women’s inequality, stated as follows: “it is not only the incidence of violence against women which limits women’s
lives, but the fear of violence which affects their daily existence, how they dress, where they go, with whom they associate, and their mode of transportation” (2). Second, it is an effect of women’s inequality: “Violence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women” (2).

With an increased focus on violence against women over the last decade, the problem has experienced a shortening of the story, in which the discourse related to violence against women has been disconnected from women’s status in society. The connection between violence against women and women’s status is obviated in the policy frame, creating a parallel discourse about violence which emphasizes a different set of factors and leading to a different conclusion about reform. The parallel discourse includes “contradictory and counterproductive frames” that are counter to equality claims put forward by feminists (Verloo 2004). Most feminists working in the anti violence sector would say their work is directly related to the project of working towards equality for women. Many of these feminists would be astounded when people not within their sector, fail to see an explicit link between violence against women and women’s subordinated status.

Government has fully exploited the feminist ‘short-speak’ about women’s equality, in which a link between violence against women and women’s equality is not explicitly stated. By placing an emphasis on the problem without reference to its relationship to women’s subordinated status, government can be seen as addressing an important social problem yet still be distanced from the larger policy problem of the ‘status of women’.

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2 Violence against women also forms part of a ‘parallel discourse’ that reinforces a Conservative ‘law and order’ agenda and the xenophobic tendency to identify domestic violence as a cultural phenomenon related to certain communities in BC (see discussion regarding immigrant women on p. 52) and to countries
From this perspective, the critique of government by feminists seems extreme and unwarranted given that government is supporting an identified feminist goal. Cuts to programs and the loss of women’s equality policy in BC and in English Canada, has frequently occurred concurrently with renewed financial and political commitments to programs that target violence against women.

For example in the 1989-90 federal budget, NAC received a 50% cut in federal funding putting the organization in financial crisis and signaling a move away from federal governmental support of feminist input to status of woman issues. Just prior to these cuts to NAC, SWC had dedicated specific dollars for the 1st Family Violence Initiative, which by 1992 increased to an allocation of $3.2 million (Standing Committee 2005). This apparent contradiction in devolving one aspect of the women’s policy sector and reinforcing another was an efficient means of diverting attention away from women’s status in favor of placing a greater focus on a social problem (see Gotell 1998).

This point is further demonstrated in the SWC Women’s Program’s organizational review in 1997 with its recommendation for outcome-based reporting for their funding dollars (Standing Committee 2005). Women centres and other groups who relied on Women’s Program funding, had to restructure their advocacy activities in order to identify distinct and measurable outcomes related to services, or the Results Management and Accountability Framework (RMAF) (SWC 1996a). With an emphasis on services, the role of women centres as an ‘advocacy’ body related to furthering women’s equality was diminished. Advocacy activities were more difficult to measure in a scheme emphasizing measurable objectives and outcomes. At the same time women centres and outside of Canada. The ‘subordination of women’ is frequently cited as just cause for military intervention into countries such as Afghanistan.
other advocacy organizations became challenged in their advocacy role because of the RMAF, the Women’s Program allocated money specifically to address ‘family violence’ after a two year hiatus after the last Initiative. When SWC funding to programs reached a ceiling of $12,435,000, family violence received steady increases until 1996 and the CHST change in funding to provinces (Standing Committee 2005). The shift in the ‘Women’s Programs’ department of the SWC from core funding to project funding in 1998 and the implementation of the RMAF framework in 2003 created a significant hit for women’s centres’ role in addressing ‘status of women’ issues or acting as an advisory to government on structural change. It became difficult for women’s centres to avoid shifting to programs or the delivery of services in order to produce measurable ‘outcomes’ in the framework required by government for continued funding (Standing Committee 2005).

In a similar vein, the control over funding gave government significant capacity to affect the work and priorities of other equality activists. The anti violence sector and the movement addressing violence against women, had always identified as part of the broader social movement with violence seen as a ‘tool of oppression’ and a mechanism of power and control sustaining women’s subordination in society (Young 1990). In BC in 2007, the elimination of the Ministry of Women’s Equality and the removal of funding to Women Centres has been accompanied by very few cuts to the anti-violence sector for programs that specifically address relationship violence. In fact, anti violence ‘services to women’ have been characterized as ‘essential services,’ and received increased funding (an increase of 12.5 million in 2005 and another 6 million in 2007) in the last few years (Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women Services 2005; 2006; Baines 2007: 12).
As the government shifted its focus to violence against women, increases in funding made it difficult for the anti violence sector to sustain a critical social analysis of this social issue in relation to women’s status. The violence against women movement found it difficult to press the equality component of anti violence work even with significant past adoption by government of the rationale, theory, and approaches of their feminist practice. In BC, even with the Ministry of Women’s Equality strong ‘femocrat’ contingent, in which feminists in government could have some degree of influence in politicizing domestic violence as a women’s equality issue, the turn in the political discourse by government supported the move away from broader gender equality claims.

The parallel discourse of violence against women as distinct from women’s status emerged in BC in the early 1990’s. The Ministry of Women’s Equality anti violence initiative Stopping the Violence programs identified its slogan, ‘Stopping the violence: a safer future for BC women’ (1991-1993) and “Violence is part of the reality of life for too many women in BC” (1992; 1993). From its onset, programs have been intended to alleviate an effect of women’s inequality and are remedial or corrective to mitigate the impact of a set of social conditions that exist for women. These programs do little however, to change the social system or structures that support these social conditions from prevailing in society.

The lack of a critical perspective and the unwillingness of government to engage with broader ‘status of women’ claims is exacerbated by an increased reliance on quantitative research to isolate concerns related to women’s inequality in BC. In an individualized framework, evidence of discrimination relies on evidence of patterning in which the individual is treated differently and unfairly in comparison to others. The concepts of
disproportional occurrence and impact, signal potential systemic discrimination. For example, suicide exists in the aboriginal population about three times higher than in the non aboriginal population (Chenier 1995), thus being aboriginal or a member of the group by ascription, increases the risk for suicide. Disproportionate occurrence is one means among others, to give evidence that some pattern based on ascriptive characteristics is apparent. However, the existence of unequal patterning does not necessarily point to the social context in which the impact of colonialism and a history of oppression is seen to contribute to health problems in First Nations communities. The disproportionate occurrence of diabetes in First Nations populations can be avoided as evidence of systemic discrimination, by pointing to this evidence as a signal of problems existing in the community, such as poor nutrition or genetic predispositions.

In the case of domestic violence, this phenomenon has helped to form the basis of a policy frame which isolates the problem in terms of ‘violence against women’, and erodes the connection between this problem and broader concerns connected to women’s equality claims. The reliance on numbers as the only means to prove the case breaks the link between the social problem and the social context in which it occurs. The measurement of occurrence of domestic violence has begun to be dependant on surveys of individuals that frequently use a scale of escalating behaviours used by individuals in conflict, and tends to be measured free of the relationship dynamic in which it occurs. Statistics Canada has recently produced figures of 6 and 7% for men and women by using the Conflict Tactics Scale, in which participants identify violence used in conflict on a scale ranging from threats to sexualized activity (Stats Can 2006). The results of this type of survey remove the behaviour from the context. The measures imply that there exists no
real disproportionality in the occurrence of violence on the basis of gender. This survey and similar studies have lent credence to the claims of men’s rights activists that male and female use of violence is relatively equal and that women-focused anti violence programs are disproportionately funded and biased against men (Boere 2005).

In using disproportionality as the primary evidence for a social response to the problem, there is no easy way to connect inequities to the social context. Rather, the problem is more easily located with individuals, where the social response should be to correct individual behaviour, either by developing skills and capacities to prevent individual violence or meting out consequences for individuals. For example, the criminal justice system has expended considerable effort in providing appropriate responses to violence against women. The criminalization of domestic violence has been seen as an important response to reducing violence against women (see Ministry of AG 1992; 1993; 1994). Feminists have recommended the criminalization of violence against women in order to counteract how this social problem has been socially reinforced to maintain a situation of inequality for women. As opposed to a paradigm of social accountability as has been intended by many feminists, the response has been generally interpreted as occurring within the paradigm of individual accountability. A social accountability approach avoids a focus on the individual offender in being characterized as a criminal and facing a penalty, and uses a critical analysis to place the focus on society to identify violence against women as equal to other crimes of a similar severity (in a measurement of harm). The premise is that the societal penalty for the use of violence should not be mitigated (made less severe) by the fact that the victim is in a spousal or intimate relationship with the offender. The logic here is that when society
distinguishes between different consequences for crimes against spouses as opposed to crimes against strangers, it will reinforce a social definition of marriage as a site of conflict and identify violence as a potential escalation (a risk) of marital conflict. To further the analysis, entrenched assumptions about marriage as a site of conflict is seen as a reinforcement of the right to maintain paternal authority in the family, in which the physical may be necessary to maintain order. This socially reinforced power dynamic that men are to be dominant within families, exists between heterosexual intimates and becomes invisible if individualized.

An example of this dynamic is in the BC Attorney General’s Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) policy. The policy focuses on ‘specialized’ criminal justice responses to violence against women but more importantly is ensuring equal criminalization of violence against women to crimes of a similar nature. The pro-arrest policy in which the RCMP lay charges if there is evidence of an assault, is equally applicable in all cases of assault. It is however, not identified as explicitly pro-arrest in relation to any other crime of violence other than domestic violence. The reason for pro-arrest policy in regards to domestic violence is to correct a social response that would often minimize domestic incidents of violence, and that placed too heavy a reliance on the victim in the past to support prosecution. The importance of the Violence Against Women in Relationships or VAWIR Policy (1993) is therefore not only due to its status as a policy tool that identifies how violence in relationships should be responded to differently, but also arises from how violence in relationships should be responded to in a similar fashion as other crimes.
Although, the use of disproportionality can be helpful to point to structural inequality, it is insufficient to provide complete evidence for a critical perspective which involves the scrutiny and examination of the social context in which the phenomenon occurs. The capacity of government to extend the analysis beyond numbers, is aided by an independent critical feminist discourse that brings social context consistently into play.

**Conclusion**

In the current climate, in which gender is present only in specific services to women, much of the aforementioned shifts in discourse have occurred in the BC case. The de-linking of violence against women from women’s inequality, has served to emphasize a focus on the individual that characterizes women as passive and helpless victims. Lise Gotell analyzes the progression of the Canadian Panel on Violence against Women formed in 1991, which appeared to “represent an emphatic legitimization of ‘violence against women’ as a political problem” (1998: 55). Instead, the Panel Report tells a story of female victimization in which all women live with the ‘risk’ of violence and “all men are potential perpetrators” (65). Gotell warns that “the fusion of gender equality with the struggle to end violence could result in the potential narrowing of claims for social entitlement. If gender inequality is violence, then the identity victim becomes the new prerequisite for making demands on the state”(67).

Gotell’s warning has been prophetic, as the infusion of dollars into this sector has managed to detract the debate from a focus on women’s status as forming the substance of the issue. The highly sensationalized content of the Report presented ‘inequality’ as inextricably intertwined with a victim and problematic identity, thus redefining the status
of women from an assessment of a social phenomenon to a feature of individuals. As a precursor to current government discourses on violence against women, the Panel Report foreshadows subsequent policy related to violence against women. The problem of violence against women has since become fully disentangled from the status of women, except for a reinforcement that women’s claims are associated to a victim identity. In the BC government, women’s services are primarily focused on responses to violence so that services for women are about being victimized.

In this manner, anti violence discourse has contributed to a de-politicization of gender in BC and English Canada through a process of the framing of a parallel discourse. Feminists engaged in solving theoretical problems have become immersed in an increasingly individualized legal and bureaucratic framework. Similarly, in a process of ‘parallel framing’ (Verloo 2004), issues or problems identified as evidence of women’s unequal status have become de-contextualized or recast within a similar individualized paradigm. In the next chapter, these factors are seen as features of a shift in discourse, in which the individual is the unit of analysis and gender is de-politicized.
Chapter 5: A new social and political discourse

The de-politicization of gender in English Canada is an example of a shifting social consciousness and a discourse that avoids a critical perspective of society and places an increasing emphasis on the individual. As a prime example in 2007, the British Columbia provincial government has little or nothing to say about the status of women in society, and makes no analysis of the impact of cutbacks to programs and the disproportionate effect of such cuts on women (Creese and Strong-Boag 2005). In this chapter, discourse and frame analysis illuminates the manner in which a shift in social and political discourse has occurred for many reasons. As discussed in chapter 3, one of these reasons relate to challenges in feminist theory which have inadvertently reinforced the trend in government to downsize and reduce intervention and funding in areas of social reform or programs. In addition, another reason described in chapter 4, occurs in the ‘capture’ of discourse by government through a process of parallel framing, in which the discourse in the women’s policy sector is placed within an individualized framework. In the following analysis, I seek to illuminate how problems related to the category of gender and the de-politicization of gender are part of the same phenomenon, of a shifting social consciousness in English Canada and a shift in the discourse related to a feminist critical social perspective.

Many factors contribute to the shift in social and political discourse that has occurred since the mid 1990’s and is apparent in 2007. Scholars of women’s policy have already pointed to a link between neoliberal or conservative ideologies and a de-politicization of gender claims (see Brodie 1998, Teghtsoonian 2000; 2003). For example, Teghtsoonian argues that ‘in British Columbia, organizational and discursive changes within
government that flow from various facets of neoliberal ideology have significantly reduced the institutional spaces within which a gendered understanding of public policy and its impacts might be articulated and made visible” (2003:28).

The neo-liberal, conservative trend in the last decades toward downsizing government and reducing cost, provides a partial explanation for a shift in focus from the social to the individual. This shift can be traced through state discourses related to gender in which the problem and the resolution reinforce the liberal framework. As a feature of the same phenomenon, the problematization of gender as a political category acts as one diversion from a sustained critical analysis on social arrangements in English Canada. The preoccupation of feminists with resolving theoretical dilemmas has opened the door to the ‘capture’ of the discourse by institutions. The success of feminists in the last decades has been in their capacity to sustain critical scrutiny on society as holding the causes for social ills affecting women. Problems related to gender have reduced the capacity of feminists to maintain a critical perspective in which, if social causes are accepted as persuasive, social responsibility is invoked and pressure is levied on government to identify social remedies. The de-politicization of gender is therefore a strong example, because of the feminist predominant focus on social change and social causes, of a shifting social consciousness in Canadian society.

This shift in social consciousness is made apparent in the next section with an increasing economic focus that tends to minimize the degree of government intervention in people’s lives. What is seen as ‘the business of Government’ has changed and is reinforced by government approaches broadly endorsed through the public through the election of conservative candidates to political office. In this chapter, the de-politicization
of gender illuminates a shift in social discourse that has pushed gender out of the public eye (see Brodie 1998; Teghtsoonian 2003). A further aspect of the shift in social discourse, explores a conception of the individual that contributes to the previous understanding and places the framework in the current context. The suggestion of a new era, in which the individual is seen as the central unit of analysis and is a variation on neo classical liberal conceptions of the individual, is under-theorized within a practical feminist discourse. The shift from the social to the individual signals a different focus on individual wellbeing in a society that is fraught with inherent risk (Beck 2002). This is not to say that altruism has disappeared or compassion is dead. To the contrary money flows from government in the new millennium to new and different causes for problems beyond the control of individuals, such as natural disasters, the degradation of the environment and terrorism. The increased focus on the environment and security as the new social problems, takes social problems out of the range of collectivities and largely out of the control of individuals. Governments and scientists are invoked to respond to what is mainly a discussion of damage control and risk management (see Beck 2002).

The new ‘public’ realm, which is the area of social life of concern to society and governments, reflects those aspects of our life condition seen as out of the control of individuals to remedy or resolve. These ‘public’ problems exist as a backdrop for individual claims and the individual is expected within this context to mitigate risk and develop capacities to navigate the possibility of hazards and pitfalls (Beck 2002). In this context in which the individual is emphasized, gender is not seen as relevant in the public sphere. Government is expected to provide limited funding for social programs and to alleviate social problems belonging to individuals and located within individual
circumstances rather than social conditions. Inequalities are problems that arise out of the individual as a lack of skill or capacity and thereby within the control of the individual to resolve.

This new phenomenon of the ‘individual’ has returned the status of women in society to the private sphere, as outside the ‘public’ realm and thereby beyond the business of government or the concern of society. This phenomenon can be detected in the ideological underpinnings of women’s policy. Political discourses and policy frames illuminate some reasons for this shift in perspective and demonstrate the difficulty to pursue group claims related to gender.

**A shift in language**

Changes in the ideological underpinnings of women’s policy became visible in the discourse related to gender as a turn away from the ‘status’ of women in the mid 1990’s, a signal that the BC government was beginning to avoid a social analysis. At this time, the discourse began to move away from emphasizing women’s social experience and status in BC society, to emphasizing the need to define and study the particular features of the category ‘women’ and the social problems attributed to the group. The change in focus represents a shift from the social to the individual, in which the category of analysis moves from social structures and patterns to characteristics of individual women. This parallel discourse is evident in the previous discussion in chapter 4 about violence against women, in which policy focused on the status of women gradually shifted to a focus on a social problem.
The parallel discourse in the government policy approach to ‘women’ has also contributed to some of the theoretical problems identified in chapter 3 that were identified as problems with the category ‘women.’ The category ‘women’ was defined in policy in a limited manner, in which problems that associated ‘women’ with a victim identity were closely related to the policy frame of ‘women’ needing special help from government. Women became less comfortable with the notion of having a problematic identity or of being constituted as helpless or a passive recipient of harms perpetrated by others (see Gotell 1998). The challenge to the traditional feminist critical discourse that failed to account for social diversity was exacerbated by the programs of government that did not address the complexity of women’s situations. The government’s response to adjust the policy frame was to include increasing add-on categories of women in relation to the problem, such as women with disabilities, aboriginal women, lesbian and trans women, etc. With an increasing number of defined categories in which each group was carved into smaller units, the problem’s connection to a gender perspective shifted to problems connected to individuals (Young 1997: 20).

Women’s claims were also associated with a range of dilemmas, including the recognition-redistribution debate, the cultural justice (and religious freedom)-sexual equality debate, and the pornography-freedom of expression debate. A number of these debates affected practical issues that entered into the public political discourse. Feminist claims have been seen as contrary to strong Canadian values and goals related to freedoms, consent and personal choice, and had significantly contributed to the perception that feminist critique is extremist, harmful or representative of a minority
position. In the avoidance of language related to the ‘status of women’ or ‘women’s equality’ government became increasingly more focused on discrete women’s problems and abandoned structural measures such as the Gender Lens.

The shift away from ‘women’s equality’ and ‘status of women’ became apparent in subtle changes in language and in the focus of materials produced by the BC Government in 1995. In the Ministry of Women’s Equality Spring 1995 edition of their newsletter, Equal Times, a focus on women’s status is still present. The Minister writes: “we will address the roots of systemic discrimination” and “work towards eliminating gender bias in the legal system” and is still a clear statement that the Ministry’s work is related to alleviating a social condition of inequality for BC women. In comparison, the next edition of Equal Times in Summer of 1995, suggests that while the Ministry is still “working towards equality for women,” it is less explicitly focused on structural or social inequality and instead is developing a focus on promoting “access” and “opportunities” for women and “making…equality and fairness for all British Columbians a priority” (1-2). This example reflects a trend of similar shifts in language in government-produced documents in BC, as the NDP government began to become more concerned with budget reduction and controlled spending.

The economic cost of women’s equality

The turn away from ‘women’s status’ in the 1990’s occurs concurrently with changes in the political economy of BC and in English Canada. Janine Brodie states that “…the emerging new state form, the neoliberal state, is progressively recoding the terrain

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3 REAL Women Canada has formed a strong lobby to pressure Government to eliminate Status of Women Canada based on these types of concerns (REAL Women Canada 2007).
of the political” (1998: 28). At the time that feminist critique reached its height and greatest degree of integration into state structures, a neo-conservative or classical liberal shift in English Canada tended towards downsizing government, the cost of social programs, and a reduction of the welfare state. The disinclination of government to sustain a critical analysis of society reflects growing partisan beliefs about a disengagement of governments with society and the nature of government responsibility for the well being of citizens. Governments have become more conservative across all party affiliations and overall this has place a stronger social emphasis on the individual to make use of her opportunities. The conditions for the best flourishing of a market economy are also seen to provide the best conditions for individuals to pursue their own best life, which is defined in terms of their own material goods and social power without a reference to the condition of others. Brodie cites a “restructuring discourse” prevalent in ‘government framing’ that “shrinks the realm of political negotiation…increasing the autonomy of market forces and the family” (1998: 29). The language of restraint and of an inevitable decrease in spending is a frequent preface in many policy frames, as is evidenced in the Federal-Provincial/Territorial (FPT) Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women Report on Economic Gender Equality Indicators; “As we approach the new millennium, we are increasingly challenged by global economic restructuring and changes in population patterns…And all must be managed with limited resources” (1997: 5).

The notion that women’s equality is expensive has persistently dogged the work of equality activists and feminists in government. Shelagh Day and Gwen Brodsky outlined in their Report the impact of the Budget Implementation Act in 1995. The Government of
Canada changed the formula for funding to the provinces from the *Canada Assistance Plan* (CAP) funding formula for social programs, to the *Canadian Health and Social Transfer* (CHST)(1998: 2). The change in funding formulas from CAP to CHST, which transferred financial responsibilities for social programs to the province, had a tremendous impact on many programs seen as contributing to an alleviation of women’s inequality in Canada. For example, how to fund women’s centres had been distinctly related to whether these organizations were advocacy bodies related to SWC or to social programs related to provincial funding. Many equality organizations had received their funding from the federal government through the SWC in the years previous to CHST. With the shift to CHST, many of these programs began to be considered part of the provinces’ responsibility. There were no federal conditions on block funding through CHST to maintain equality organizations as a priority (Brodsky and Day 1998).

Economic policy in English Canada and BC has been framed as separate from women’s equality, yet the perception of pursuing women’s equality has always existed parallel with the alleviation of social need. Although the work of equality organizations had been distinct from organizations providing services, the movement’s focus on social reform and on the care of vulnerable members in society, in addition to equality claims, has linked costs to both social programs and equality.

In the 1990’s, pressures on government to be fiscally responsible challenged the welfare state and the federal government’s funding of so called ‘advocacy or interest groups.’ Interest groups became less popular with the general public and these views reinforced a neoliberal ideology about the reduction of the role of government in society. Feminists had contributed significant resistance to the Government’s agenda for
constitutional reform in 1987 and early 1990’s, with their concern that women’s equality would be undermined. Governments became less in favor of bolstering a strong political lobby that would identify goals contrary to their political objectives (Rebick 2005). This phenomenon was repeated in the cutting of funding to women’s centres in BC in 2004 and changed the positioning of advocates in relationship to Government (BC Coalition of Women’s Centres 2006). The women’s movement was recast as an ‘interest group’ and as self interested lobbyists primarily interested in securing goods, benefits or programs for their clients. Teghtsoonian cites the magazine BC Report (1993) as stating “women’s this or women’s that…is hardly concerned with all women” to demonstrate how “feminist perspectives are often framed as not only inappropriately political, but as antithetical to the interests of all women” (2004: 113). Similar sentiments exist on the REAL Women Canada website, in which the views of feminists are seen as not representative of all women (2007).

Teghtsoonian has noted the shift in ideology in the Ministry of Women’s Equality (MWE) from a ‘Strategic Plan’ to a ‘Business plan’ between the years 95-96 to demonstrate how the BC government began to shift to a more economic focus (2003: 39). Other examples of a similar ideological shift in government is seen in the MWE changes to its Vision statements in the Business plans between the fiscal year 1996-97 and the following year 1997-98. In the first year, the Ministry “makes a positive difference in women’s lives by developing and delivering programs that expand choices and promote economic security, personal safety and well being.’ This statement was removed in the 97-98 Business plan, and replaced with the statement that the Ministry “consults, researches, advocates and educates on equality for women”. In this manner, the Ministry
downplays its responsibility for a set of social outcomes, and becomes instead a passive source of information or support. Another change in the Vision includes a shift from ‘sharing equally in the economic benefits of society…’ to ‘sharing equally the economic and social resources of society’. The shift is ideological and represents a different understanding of the role of government in society (Ministry of Women’s Equality 96/97; 97/98).

The use of the Gender Lens, with its intent of integrating a gendered analysis into all Ministries and all policy, also implied a broad, immense and costly task ahead to alleviate inequality for women. In addition, any attempts to bring a gender analysis to the Budget process have been strongly resisted in Canadian and BC governments. That budgets can be subject to a gender lens has been introduced in the EU, and confirmed in the Beijing +5 Platform for Action in 2000 (Bakker 2006: 4). The work initiated by the FPT Ministers on Gender Equality Indicators (1997), was to establish the measures in which to conduct Gender Impact Assessments (Verloo and Roggeband 1996) to identify the impact of economic policy on women’s equality through the use of social and economic indicators. The move toward gendering budgets in the 1990’s threatened to curtail a neoliberal economic agenda, and created significant incentive for Governments to avoid the direction of this path.

The conception of the individual

The de-politicization of gender has occurred partly as a result of changes in the political economy of BC and English Canada. Yet many of these changes relied on the ability of government to shift an existing discourse away from one that sustained a
critical focus on gender in the social context. Government is averse to maintaining social and institutional scrutiny on itself and the capacity of a gender lens approach relies on an effective external social critique. Feminists have been sufficiently diverted by these challenges and find themselves operating within an increasingly individualized framework. The shift away from the status of women or a social analysis has led to an increasing focus on the individual. The shifting social consciousness of Canadian society is increasingly focused on the individual as the unit of social responsibility. This focus supports political agendas to reduce the costs of social programs. The challenges associated with gender have made it difficult for feminists to sustain a social critique based on a claim that women as a group have a coherent and recognizable social experience. As the emphasis is placed on the individual in determining his or her best life, much less rests with government to address the reasons for a person’s capacity to do well. Brodie talks about a “new understanding of what it means to be a citizen” (1998: 30), that the “neoliberal turn in English Canada has effectively disenfranchised the social citizen” and replaced the social with a new conception of the individual (Brodie 2002: 378).

A helpful contribution to this proposition is the concept of ‘individualization’ introduced by Beck (1999) The new individual, according to Beck, is created by the welfare state through a process of social democratization, in which people are defined in terms of their separate claims on society and their capacity to create their own best life. The “rights and entitlements” of society are designed for individuals, presuppose “norms of employment, education, and mobility” and “invite people to constitute themselves as individuals and should they fail, to blame themselves” (9). The state constitutes its
citizenry as individuals through the allocation of social goods, through the courts, through legislation, and through political discourse.

The process of individualization occurs within a social context that is global and fraught with inherent risk. An increase of fear in the context of violence and uncertainty in society, in which individuals live in a climate of global terrorism and environmental change, increases the tendency for people to think of the well being of society in terms of a focus on the safety in their own lives. Beck argues that the ‘post-global’ individual is never free of this context, and in its enormity, tends to produce “exhaustion, dissolution, and disenchantment with collective and group specific sources of meaning” (74). Instead, when individuals engage with altruism or social improvement goals, they do so as individuals and through aggregate giving and action rather than through group identity and collective action.

The shifting social consciousness in Canadian society is radically apparent in a discourse that moves away from a critical analysis of social structures as offered by feminism. The state has cut social programs and benefits of the welfare state within a context that presupposes a norm of societal equality, and the individual capacity to improve his or her social situation with the right set of skills and with correct choices. In fact, the process of individualization is in itself a normative value, which measures individual success as the capacity to mitigate risk and maneuver the hazards of unpredictable social life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 4). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim assert that “the social significance of inequalities has changed” (30) and have “become redefined in terms of an individualization of social risks. The result is that social problems are increasingly perceived in terms of psychological dispositions” (39). In spite
of considerable inequality that persists for women in Canadian society, the social imagination for the individual woman has changed, in which she is expected to take advantage of a broad range of choices available. Beck-Gernsheim describes this shift as one ‘from self abnegation and self sacrifice’ to an expectation of ‘a life of one’s own’ (55-56). A young woman acquaintance expresses this notion succinctly when she says ‘my friends and I choose to act as though equality exists.’ She points to the belief that risks are present for everyone, and the individual self identifies the degree to which social conditions are mitigated and possibilities are realized. An acknowledgement of barriers in society becomes in itself an acknowledgement of defeat.

**Using equality loosely**

Within this new neoliberal context, there is a resurgence of liberal notions of equality, in which neutrality and objectivity are seen as the central principles of fairness and form the basis of the dispensation of justice and of governing society. The symbol of justice in the courts is a figure blindfolded from knowing the characteristics of the persons that come to face the court for decisions about their accountability to society or to protect them from the harm related to the actions of others. The equal treatment of all people, meaning the same application of rules or ‘formal’ equality, is seen as intuitively right and fair, but assumes a neutral society in which people are situated similarly in opportunity and access.

The neoliberal understanding of fair distribution, in which society makes the determination of who gets what, social and material goods are distributed without knowing the circumstances of the persons receiving them. The ‘rules’ must not favor one
person over another, based on who they are or their social location, or their membership in any particular group. This is as commonsensical for most people, as is the decision of the mother in a family to ask one child to cut the pie, with the other child choosing the first piece. The cutter will invariably cut the pie equally to ensure his or her fair share, as well as inadvertently ensuring that others in the family will have equal shares as well. Fairness is understood as best assured in this approach by not knowing who will receive which share.

In contrast, a critical analysis of the pie-cutting family illuminates how social arrangements that are seen as given can determine social realities and an individual’s experience of benefit and position in society. For an individual who seeks remedy in a situation of inequality, the Courts can both re-assert equal ‘pie-cutting’ rules (formal equality) and also examine the social arrangements that support unequal allocation or result, in an interpretation of ‘substantive’ equality (Andrews v. Law Society [1989]). Substantive equality then, looks at social arrangements and individual circumstances in determining fair outcomes, and takes into the account the social context of a ‘situated self’, or the social determinants of individual experience.

There has been a resurgence of a standard of formal equality in BC. This standard allows government to avoid a social analysis of the condition of people’s lives and the public accepts that equality of opportunity and equal application of the rules is generally assured. An increasing focus on individuals and their capacity to do well reinforces the tendency to frame policy as though opportunity and access exists equally for all citizens in BC society. The inequality of individuals becomes tolerated in a society of equality of opportunity because the differences in life stories are interpreted as being related to ‘poor
choices’ taken by individuals, to quote BC’s Minister of State for Women’s Services (Langley Advance News 2003). Any services dedicated to women are frequently characterized as biased against men and is demonstrated in the headline “Gender bias hurts dads” (Boere 2005). Reframing what ‘equality’ means in government contributes significantly to the reluctance of women to identify as needing services because they are encouraged to look at this need as a personal failure.

**Conclusion**

The de-politicization of gender in the BC case has been accomplished through a series of shifts in discourse and policy frames, in which government has distanced itself from addressing women’s equality and the status of women in BC. The shift in discourse has effectively accomplished the removal of gender from the political agenda by avoiding a critical analysis with a focus on society, to an increasing emphasis on the individual. Problems with the category of gender have weakened effective resistance from feminists inside and outside of government. A broader shift in the social and political consciousness in Canada has tended to create a general acceptance of the direction of government and placed an increasing emphasis on individual responsibility for the conditions of people’s lives.

In spite of such political lethargy and a resistance to collective action, there remains an opportunity for a re-politicization of BC citizens to resist this increasing social and economic hierarchy. The final section of this paper explores how attempts to resolve challenges with the category of gender have tended to reinforce a focus on the individual and provide further evidence of the shift in social consciousness and political discourse.
A new critical perspective must find creative means to re-engage with a focus on the social, not in a way as to produce deterministic outcomes or reify social relationships, but rather to illuminate the dynamics of social discourse and the impact of social structures on individual lives.
Chapter 6: Impact on feminist activism

The de-politicization of gender has had a significant impact on the movement within English Canada towards equality for women. Theoretical problems associated with gender have had implications for policy development and affect the inclination of government to address women’s equality as part of their political agenda. Gender is not popular as a claim for remedy and understanding. Theorists, practitioners and activists have used a variety of strategies to meet the challenges posed by gender as a social category. Many of the resolutions to problems associated with gender and much of the recent critique on government have tended to reinforce an individualized framework and have not resolved the problem. Feminists find they are operating in the same paradigm that supports a trend in government to frame policy with the individual as the primary focus of programs and benefits. This phenomenon implies an overall shift in the relationship between the individual and the social, and the responsibilities of government to address social need. In the absence of a sustained critical perspective on society and governments, the responsibility for social well being rests on the individual and their efforts to attain their own ‘best life’.

The increasing emphasis on the individual and a corresponding shift in the ‘framing’ of policy has developed a ‘parallel discourse’ that has effectively weakened a critical social perspective. Feminist theory has yet to resolve these problems in a manner that invokes social responsibility and sustains the link between social problems facing women and their social, political and economic status in society. An engagement with a new feminist discourse must address the de-politicization of gender within a critical social view as an added perspective to individualist resolutions.
Challenges with responding to the de-politicization of gender

Problems associated with gender have created significant difficulty for feminists to sustain a critical analysis in the face of changes in government direction and the de-politicization of gender in BC. The first problem identified in chapter 3 of the unity of the category ‘women’ has created significant challenges for feminists to identify women as a group with similar set of social experiences or claims. Feminist have been concerned with biases within the feminist movement that have tended to reflect a dominant group of women, claiming to represent all women. Strategies to accommodate the ‘category as unity’ problem have included efforts to recognize the exclusions of western feminist ideology and address what has appeared biased or discriminatory. Much of this analysis has involved looking at a policy area or a problem by considering its impact on women, and then providing an added analysis that includes the impact for various subsets of women. This approach has also been used in government documents as seen in the VAWIR policy in the BC Ministry of the Attorney General (1993). The add-on solution to making the category of gender more inclusive, attempts to recognize differences between women and recognize how oppression is intersected by the presence of other structural disadvantages. However, a true analysis of intersectionality is usually missed in government documents. Increasingly more variables are added to the understanding of the problem of inequality and the scrutiny remains on the individual for how she is multiply affected by a range of oppressions. With differences heightened and examined between members within the group, gender as a category becomes a difficult claim to hold. The argument appears that any claim for the group can be disputed by looking at individual experiences. The group as a group loses its political salience and the smaller
subsets approach analyses that recognize and focus on the individual (Young 1997: 20).

In making claims to government on the basis of women as a group, feminists find that identifying any set of conditions as affecting women as a whole, is subject to scrutiny and reaction. The women’s movement has tried to open up its membership in organizations and be more inclusive. Many women centred spaces are now generally ‘trans’ friendly and are examining their policies to determine how men might be included in limited ways. The cries of bias that have emerged mainly from men’s rights activists now resonate with the general populace. Many women are reluctant to identify with a collective experience which is defined on the basis on gender, because they fear that doing so demonstrates an unfair bias in favor of women. Women’s organizations have also tried to be more mainstream in their approach to services, in order to continue to qualify for funding and avoid criticism.

The second problem identified in chapter 3 is the ‘creation of gender dilemmas.’ Strategies to cope with dilemmas in which social aims, rights or freedoms are counterposed to claims based on gender are also complex. For example, Fraser’s conceptual framework of the redistribution-recognition debate identifies two distinct bases for claims of injustice (1997: 69). Fraser argues that social movements that focus on recognition claims do so at a cost to furthering material equality for disadvantaged groups. The recognition argument relies on a conception of the problem that identifies women as a unitary category and is further de-legitimized because its goals advance an identity politics that frustrate other objectives. Fraser’s point appears to be confirmed in an increasing tolerance for economic inequality in English Canada which is seen to be the result of individual capacities to do well or fail. A lesser goal of economic equality in
Canadian society appears to be ‘equal treatment’ and to be ‘difference blind’ in the apportioning of social goods (Rawls 1971; Taylor 1994). Money is reallocated from those who have more wealth and redistributed to those who have very little, through means such as taxes and mostly through charitable giving. Rather than a ‘simple or strict egalitarianism’, activists generally argue that economic inequalities must be fair or just; reflecting natural differences in aptitude, opportunities, or circumstances. Many material activists are only concerned with the plight of the very poor, collecting only to argue that none go hungry and no person should sleep in the street (see Phillips 1999). With the emphasis on concerns raised for the plight of the very poor, the claims for equality as based on recognition claims seem frivolous and less important.

The gender/ culture dilemma is also difficult to resolve because culture (and religious freedom) has a strong imperative within Canadian multiculturalism. Any gender claim that calls into question a cultural or religious practice is often interpreted as racist or biased, or as interfering with freedoms associated with the private sphere. One of the popular responses to this dilemmas has been to examine the ‘offending’ group through liberal lenses to determine if central liberal ideals about autonomy, consent and the right to exit are preserved within the group. Broadly cast, this strategy considers culture in a manner similar to a ‘voluntary association’ in which the individual can choose to join the group of her choosing and prescribe herself to the rules set out by the group as a condition of membership. This strategy provides some safeguards for a society wishing to allow the maximums freedoms for individuals to choose their attachments and pursue what they define as a good life. It allows people the option to choose lifestyles contrary to mainstream society where freedom is a dominant value. It is possible in this view for an
individual to be committed to a membership in which freedom is significantly curtailed. By consenting to the restrictive elements of memberships, it is conceivable that other benefits become available. It is crucial then in the liberal framework that individuals must be viewed as though they are members by consent and have the capacity to leave (see Reitman, Levy and other essays in Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev: 2005). For example, in feminist discussions regarding women in Bountiful or women in abusive relationships, the emphasis is on individual women and their capacity to leave rather than an analysis of structural barriers.

The third problem identified in chapter 3, is the resistance to a social critique or the victim problem. Strategies to respond to the resistance to social critique have been the most difficult for feminist activists in an increasingly individualized political and social framework. Feminists lobbying for any particular social policy find that they must be cautious about using a critical or social analysis. A social analysis must include room to account for individual differences and the capacity of individuals to resist and raise above the circumstances of their lives. In providing a social critique of an issue that contributes to women’s inequality within society, activists find that they must provide caveats or exceptions to allow for individual variations to the patterns being described.

Feminists have tried to avoid ‘victim’ language and use ‘survivor’ discourse as one such strategy to combat negative connotations. The critique of society through an analysis of sexism has also been extended to include ‘anti oppression’ practices and all ‘oppressive’ structures such as colonialism, race, class and other categories in order to avoid the assertion that gender has primacy in contributing to social identity, status and benefit. Women express concerns that a social analysis is deterministic, negates their
agency and their capacity to overcome what they are generally led to believe are personal not social obstacles.

Based on anecdotal evidence from feminist activists in the last decade, any analysis of sexism in 2007 must generally include its own limitations. An analysis in 2007 must include an acknowledgement that its perspective cannot encompass realities for all women or that the problem is not isolated to women alone. For example, whereby at the height of the era of women’s activism in the 1980’s an activist could state that women are sexualized in society and are primarily the victims of sexual assault, today it is difficult to make this claim without acknowledging that men can also be sexually assaulted. The most frequent question that arises in many public discussions about social problems affecting women, is ‘what about men?’ Compare this phenomenon with a discussion about a social problem affecting any other marginalized or disadvantaged group and the problems created for feminists become apparent. For example, imagine discussing the high risk of diabetes for First Nations peoples within an analysis of the impact of colonialism on the health of this community. It would seem strange to hear speakers or discussants make conditional their statement by adding a caveat about the occurrence of diabetes within the dominant culture. Sexism is thus, differently heard or accepted in public discourse. Although, strong individualist language pervades explanations for all conditions of economic and social inequality, advocates for women’s equality must constantly attend to integrating liberal assumptions into their discussion of any social issue.\(^4\)

\(^4\) For example, Canada’s First Nations peoples seeking to restore aboriginal title face considerable resistance through arguments related to the supposed dispossession and economic harm for Euro Canadians.
**Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that the attempts to resolve all three problems of gender; the women as unitary category debate, the creation of gender dilemmas and the victim problem, have deepened the individualist discourse by emphasizing concepts that are antithetical to a critical perspective of gender in the social context. Strategies to counter problems associated with gender have inadvertently reinforced the de-politicization of women’s equality claims. Problems associated with gender have pushed the debates into the private sphere, and gender has become less relevant to public political discourses. Aspects relevant to women are ‘privatized’ and are seen as occurring within the realm of individual choice and consent. The movement of equality for women has become a discourse about individual problems in individual people’s lives. Sexism becomes a problem for individuals and less a social and structural phenomenon. And finally, the individual is seen as separate and prior to, and as the possessor of various group identities such as gender and culture, as opposed to partially produced through social context.

Problems associated with gender and the de-politicization of gender claims illuminate a broader shift in social and political discourse that is resistant to a critical social perspective of gender in the social context. Problems related to gender have not yet successfully been resolved in a manner that can sustain critical scrutiny on society and the direction of government. Traditional feminist approaches of the 1970’s and 1980’s cannot effectively respond to changes in policy that move away from ‘women’s equality’ as a priority of government. Feminists are frustrated when strategies of the past to engage politicians and protest against government, continue to fail and worsen their position.
Governments engage with citizens in an increasingly individualized and bureaucratized framework that is antithetical to a social activist approach that no longer resonates in the current political climate. However, the individualist approach cannot sufficiently address how people’s chances are affected by social structures and relationships.

This paper has considered how the problematization of gender and a change in the neoliberal agendas of government have contributed to a shift in social and political discourse. The discourse has supported a de-politicization of gender as a basis of social claims and has weakened the movement for women’s equality in BC and English Canada. This phenomenon has also pointed to a weakening of a critical perspective of gender in the social context, and must be renewed within a critical theory that can address the problems of the past and respond to the conditions of the future.
Conclusion: a renewed critical perspective

For a critical perspective to sustain gender as a legitimate political category it must include several of the features outlined throughout this paper. First, a critical theory must have a social orientation or focus in which society, social structures, systems, and social relationships are brought under scrutiny. Second, a critical theory must make visible the means in which social categories such as gender are used to regulate social positions and benefits within society. Third, a critical theory makes assumptions about just arrangements and articulates and promotes some better condition.

Attempts to address problems related to gender and a corresponding shift in policy discourse have tended to emphasize the individual, and have both echoed and confirmed a shift in the ideological and political consciousness of Canadians. Baffled by the lack of the salience of feminist claims, women who have identified past successes and see ‘status of women’ policy fading away, find themselves constrained in a discourse that only appears to reinforce the direction of neoliberal governments.

The issue of violence against women provides a good example of how a critical perspective can sustain a link between the social problem and the social context, and maintain gender as a political concept. The critical perspective promotes the relevance of gender to political or public discourses, in which the issues or problems illuminate social arrangements that support and are the result of patterns of inequality. Discourses related to problems associated with the category of gender also have the potential for resolutions within a critical framework.

Young states that “the primary task for feminist theory and politics is critical: to formulate genealogies that show how a given category of practice is socially constructed”
For example, in Young’s contribution to the ‘women as unitary category’ problem, she draws on Sartre’s concept of ‘seriality’ which avoids looking at gender as a discrete category or as an attribute of individuals, but rather sees gender as ‘positional’ in relation to social contexts. She illuminates this shift in perspective with Sartre’s example of waiting for the bus, in which a group of individuals waiting at the same bus stop are diverse in their personal circumstances, characteristics, or history. What brings them together as a group and leads them to behave in certain expected ways, are the rules and norms related to ‘bus waiting’. Sartre uses this example to explain his definition of a ‘series’ as a “social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects their actions are oriented around and/or the objectified results of the material effects of the action of others” (Sartre in Young 1997: 23). By introducing the concept of seriality, Young shifts the problem. She places the discourse within a critical framework, or moves from a focus on individuals to a focus on the social context. In the individualized approach, the critique of a gender analysis has been that the use of gender erases the complex heterogeneity of people who identify as female. In a social context approach, diverse individuals can find themselves unified by complex social meanings attached to gendering.

The de-politicization or privatization of gender avoids a social or structural critique of inequality and places gender beyond the reach of state intervention. The shift from a social or structural approach to a privatized, individualist perspective is apparent in structures and policy focused on women in the BC government. Current policy reflects a remedial approach which enhances individual capacities rather than correcting structural barriers. A remedial approach creates policy in government which offer some
remedy to assist individuals in overcoming their incapacities. Such remedies may recognize a historical and biological disadvantage, but fail to examine societal structures that sustain patterns holding inequality in place.

A critical approach in contrast looks at societal structures in addition to providing remedy and reinforces the link between the social problem and the social context in which it occurs. Structures in society are examined to identify what social patterns or arrangements are being reinforced and what is the impact of sustaining these patterns. Consider an analogy of playing golf from the ladies’ tees, in which women are offered a remedy to account for a shorter drive length capacity and still potentially achieve par, by advancing their starting position. The remedy allows for women to play on a golf course designed for men without penalizing them for biological differences in size and strength. The fact that the structure of the course itself is not questioned (i.e. are 500 yard holes necessary for the game?) and that such differences produce a hierarchy of play that is gendered remain unexamined.

A critical approach to gender analysis can be identified in discourses provided by government in the 1970’s to the mid 1990’s, and has dramatically changed the range of options available to women at work and in their families. The assertion of this paper is that a critical perspective of gender in the social context has consistently supported the adoption of gender as a political category, and contributed to the degree gender has become the subject of attention and concern by governments. In addition, I recognize that problems associated with gender and the shift in government to individualist resolutions, has limited the ability of the feminist movement to develop activist strategies outside of the state, in which to bring forward a concern for the position of women in society.
Where the de-politicization of gender has disentangled violence against women from the status of women in BC, the federal policy unit dedicated to women’s equality has maintained some institutional legitimacy and funding. However, the gender analysis component of the SWC Ministry is a unit segregated from the rest of government. Since 2000, federal government ministries have avoided the integration of a gender analysis in any visible format and have had no clear adoption of Gender Based Analysis (GBA) into policy development. The SWC continues to maintain its presence in federal politics, in part, because of the continued pressures of international bodies. In countries where women’s inequality and lesser status is claimed to be more overt, world and transnational bodies such as the UN and the Council of Europe have continued to focus on women and equality. It is difficult to say, whether this continued focus is an example of commitments to women’s equality or a means of identifying the subordination of women as a cultural phenomenon of extremist or terrorist groups and to justify military interventions.

Gender based analysis and in particular gender mainstreaming, is still seen as important at the EU level and in some European countries. International pressures have kept Canadian federal government interested in attending to gender equality as an objective, but the degree to which this activity has materialized into structural change is minimal at best since 2000. Verloo identifies a similar phenomenon at the EU level: “there are no actors… that focus on gender inequalities as a problem in itself” (2004). The UN’s current shift to a focus on violence against women provokes a concern that women’s equality will continue to lose momentum as a policy objective in governments around the world.
In spite of the continued existence of a dedicated policy unit at the federal level for the status of women; the diversion of the anti violence sector to providing services and the gradual elimination of financial supports to women’s centres, bookstores and publications has virtually silenced any sustained critical perspective at the grassroots or community level. The strength of the feminist lobby on government has been carried for some time by academics and legal feminists, both of which are grappling with theoretical challenges in articulating gender within an increasingly liberal or individualized paradigm. At the level of the community, the grassroots and radical elements of feminism have been decimated by loss of funding, division in the ranks of those who have funding and those who don’t, and through the continued capture of the discourse about problems affecting women by government.

However, the community or grassroots feminist movement continues to be an important source of a critical perspective, in which society and social structures can be the focus of the critique. A new critical discourse must grapple with theoretical challenges and emerge at some distance from government. In addition, bureaucrat, academic and legal feminists have also recognized that critical discourse must coincide with a political activism that has resonance in women’s lives. To stimulate the imagination of Canadian women, especially young women, the isolated standpoint of the ‘post-global’ individual must be deconstructed within a feminist critical theory. ‘The individual’ in Canadian society continues to be gendered, and society continues to produce gendered meanings that produce problematic effects for women. The ‘personal’ must remain ‘political’ and of ‘public’ concern. For those activists close to women’s stories of inequities in their families, workplaces, and institutions, they must seek the
opportunity to act politically and contribute to the social dialogue that might have influence on public opinion.

In the course of the Twentieth Century, gender has developed as a political category as a basis of claims on government to improve conditions for women. Gender has been politicized in English Canada through the social reform origins of a diverse range of feminisms and a consistent critical approach to society and social structures. The fruition of a continued and sustained engagement with government, within a social critique framework, contributed to the evolution of ‘women’s issues’ to an engagement of governments with the ‘status of women’ and ‘women’s equality’ as the basis of policy. Engagement with the ‘status of women’ is based on a social perspective that seeks to illuminate how gender is relevant within social hierarchies and assumes that government takes responsibility to address sexism in society.

Throughout this study, gender as a political category has been identified as erased from most political discourses. The BC government no longer engages with ‘women equality’ and the ‘status of women’ in their policy agenda. The de-politicization of gender in the BC case is likely a precursor of a continued privatization of gender in English Canada and a distancing of governments from addressing gendered social hierarchies. Indeed, the dominant political and public social discourse has emphasized the responsibility of individuals in a climate of equal opportunity and equal risk.

The question proposed in this paper has been, what is the phenomenon that has made gender a difficult category to use as a basis of claims on government and society? How has gender inequality become a ‘privatized’ characteristic of individuals rather than a ‘public’ concern to governments?
Although the de-politicization of gender can be attributed to many causes, a shift in social and political discourse in society has ‘privatized’ and reduced the space for political activism. Theoretical problems associated with gender have diverted feminists from a sustained critical perspective on the social context and created space for a capture of ‘equality’ discourse by government, to a more manageable and inexpensive strategy of focusing on problems. In addition, ideological, political and economic shifts in English Canada have shifted policy framing and political discourse to a new conception of the individual, partially constituted through the increased bureaucratization of the state, the influences of a globalized market economy and a global context of risk. Feminists have become constrained within an increasingly individualized and ‘privatized’ discourse that confirms a de-politicization of gender claims.

Many feminists find it difficult to determine what it means to be feminist as opposed to humanist and what it means to carve out an added analysis beyond the individual without essentializing groups, reifying social relationships or setting up immovable and deterministic outcomes. The weakening of a critical perspective on the social context has reduced the capacity for an engaged dialogue between social activists and government and seriously hampered the progress of equality for women.

Through the last decades, gender has become a significant political category, having brought women ‘to their feet’ to improve the experience of women in society. Yet, the women’s movement has also struggled to address theoretical problems and a shift in government direction in the face of criticism and backlash. The difficulty has been to sustain feminism as a critical perspective on society in spite of these challenges. Feminism cannot thus be fixed and stagnant in its critical view. Feminists in response to
critiques have often turned the critical analysis on its own theories and approaches, and shifted away from a focus on society and social transformation. In addition, in the absence of new approaches to a critical perspective on the social context, the critique on the de-politicization of the category of gender has tended to echo and reconfirm the feminist approach of the past. Without a supportive critical approach for social change that is able to respond within current social contexts, women’s equality as a social aim loses political salience, meaning and power.

The exact conditions and factors that have made gender political in English Canada and BC in the late 1960’s to the early 1990’s are not replicable. However, significant factors and material are present to generate a continued critical perspective on the social context in order to illuminate how gender is relevant as part of a political agenda in English Canada. The perspectives of the past may conceptually provide guidance for the continued politicization of gender in the new millennium. A renewed feminist critical perspective can provide engagement with the social conditions of the future.
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