UNEQUAL FUTURES: THE LEGACIES OF CHILD POVERTY IN CANADA

Brigitte Kitchen *et al.* Toronto: The Child Poverty Action Group and the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1991.

By Nelly Tion

Unequal Futures examines the structural sources that engender, maintain, and perpetuate child poverty in Canada—to the extent that one in every six children continues to be virtually condemned to poverty as a birth right. The book's analysis is based on the sources of the differences in access to social rewards and the extent of market and government engendered inequalities. The authors identify and analyze the federal government's supply-side policies, which have resulted in shifting the burden of taxation on to low and middle income individuals and families, in reducing social benefits, and in eroding the minimum wage—all factors contributing to the declining economic circumstances of middle and low income children and their families.

The effects of child poverty in predetermining health, social functioning, educational and employment opportunities into adulthood are examined. An analysis of the disparities in life chances among Canadian children points out the fallacy of the widely accepted myth that equal opportunity can be promoted though education. Often seen as offering all children a chance to overcome the limitations of the poverty they were born into, publicly-funded education can actually serve to reproduce the disadvantage of poor children. *Unequal Futures* argues that child and family poverty cannot be addressed through selective services and benefits directed at the poor. Recommendations include the entrenchment of an explicit constitutional commitment to the principle of financing a federal income security system for families with children, which would reflect a national commitment to the reduction of disparities.

The analysis of the nature and sources of child and family poverty includes an examination of gender-based issues. The authors note that the increase in the last decade of the number of female-led lone parent families has been widely associated with child poverty. Employment of both parents has become a necessity to maintain reasonable standards of living for a family. Mothers are forced to experience the contradiction of meeting this demand to maintain individual and family self-sufficiency, while facing disadvantages and inequities in the labour market. At the same time they still bear the major responsibility for child raising, a job not renumerated by direct earnings. Segregation into lower paying jobs, inadequate child care, non-payment or inadequate amounts of support by non-custodial parents, all contribute to making female-led lone parent families one of the highest risk groups for poverty. Statistics reveal that the child poverty rate is 25 per cent for families with mothers in full-time employment compared with a rate of 6.2 per cent when the father is employed full-time.

Unequal Futures is a detailed and well-developed argument for a renewed collective commitment to reducing child and family poverty through constitutional entrenchment of the principle of true equalization of opportunity for all children and their families.

A disappointing feature of the authors' analysis is the lack of any examination, or even substantive acknowledgment, of the compounded risks and disadvantages faced by children, women, and families whose barriers to accessing equal opportunities are made even more formidable because they are racial minorities, because of their immigration status, or because they are disabled. For example, statistics from the disabled community indicate that unemployment for women with disabilities reaches as high as 80 per cent. How disabled, racial minority, and Aboriginal women and their families experience poverty should at least have been part of the gender analysis of poverty.

Not addressing the discriminatory barriers faced by such minority groups gives rise to serious questions about the adequacy of the analysis underpinning *Unequal Futures*. Without a serious examination of the different faces and experiences of child and family poverty, and the sources of those different experiences, the validity of the prescriptions for change is also called into question.

THE POLITICS OF BREASTFEEDING

Gabrielle Palmer. London: Pandora Press Issues in Women's Health Series, 1988.

By Liz Philipose

The Politics of Breastfeeding is a clear and comprehensive account of the ways in which women's "mammalian ability" to produce and dispense breastmilk has been replaced with the use of "prosthetic

instruments" (bottles) and "second-class substitutes" (formula) for infant feeding. Palmer argues that the replacement of breastfeeding with bottle feeding has had little to do with freeing women from a so-called "time-wasting biological tyranny," or improving the health of mother or baby. Rather, she links the global decline of breastfeeding to industry's quest for profits and the medical management of childbirth and infant care.

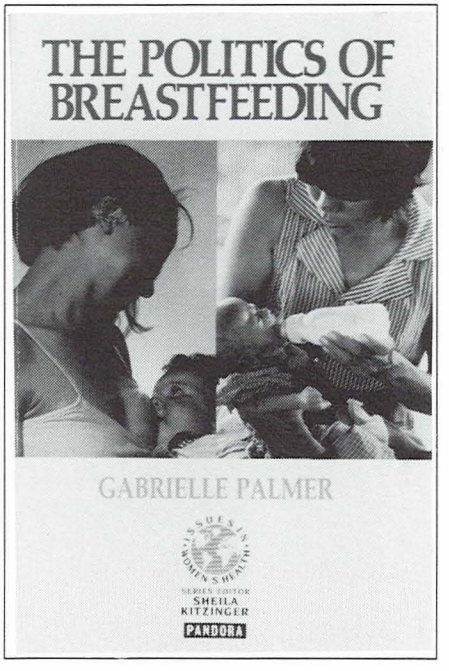
Palmer demonstrates that the "baby milk" market was created in the interests of manufactuers and doctors. The process of medicalization has limited women's control of infant feeding and destroyed their confidence in their bodies' ability to function. The "insufficient milk syndrome" is accepted by most health care workers as a natural and widespread condition, especially among undernourished women. However, evidence shows that very few women are biologically unable to produce milk. Rather than investigating the absence of physical factors in insufficient milk production, the bottle feeding alternative is presented as an equally satisfactory method. This myth becomes part of the justification for baby milk exports into poor countries.

The baby milk industry thrives in countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Brazil, India, Pakistan, and Papua New Guinea, in addition to the countries of North America and Europe. The links between health care and industry, as well as advertising and aggressive marketing, combine to replace women's confidence in their bodies with confidence in baby milk products.

According to Palmer, the ill-effects of scientising infant feeding abound, and the tragedies of breast milk substitutes continue to this day. The baby milk industry follows the dictates of nutritional fashion in its attempt to create products which simulate breastmilk. Breastmilk is replaced by dairy industry waste, condensed milk, pea flour and bicarbonate of potash concoctions. Not surprisingly, untold numbers of babies die needlessly from malnutrition and diarrhea, and an unknown number suffer from debilitating health problems.

Perhaps the most infamous baby milk producer is Nestlé. Palmer devotes much of her argument to the ways in which Nestlé has extended and secured its reach into global markets. Even after the widely documented Nestlé boycott, the liaisons between medicine, commerce and government maintain Nestlé's profit-making baby milk industry.

Palmer locates the devaluation of breastfeeding in the scientific discourse of manipulating nature. In this discourse, infant feeding has been removed from the realm of (female) nature to be managed by the (male) "formula cult" of rigorous exactitude, mathematics and chemistry. The damage is staggering. Breastmilk is wasted. Energy is wasted. Production of baby milk (which sustains the dairy cow industry) requires that cows eat grains, the staple food for most of the world's human population. The global population



explosion, can, in part, be attributed to the displacement of lactational birth control. The irony is that overpopulation and scarcity are perceived to be Third World epidemics, yet it is in these countries that the baby milk industry thrives.

Some readers may find Palmer's suggestions for revaluing breastfeeding through wages, her anthropological material (breastfeeding through the ages), and her indictment of Western imperialism, to be less than compelling. As well, despite her careful arguments to the contrary, her reassertion of the 'man-science/woman-nature' dichotomy could be selectively appropriated by those who want to argue that only women are naturally suited to childrearing.

Much of the information Palmer presents is available elsewhere, and there are probably better resources for those researching the practices of particular baby milk producers or the effects of baby milk substitutes in specific countries. What is useful about this book is its synthesis of material in a comprehensive overview. The appendices and bibliography are a good basis for further research. More interesting than Palmer's solutions are the questions she raises, which have import in a variety of fields, such as community health and hospital planning, 'development' policy and nutritional counselling.

For the general reader, this is a highly informative and generally persuasive feminist argument. Palmer combines medical and nutritional research with anecdotal accounts, wit and scathing sarcasm to present a sophisticated argument in an entertaining manner. While raising suspicions about industry in general, she effectively demonstrates that breastfeeding is in fact a political issue which has profound social, economic, and cultural consequences.

THE POLITICS OF ABORTION

Janine Brodie, Shelley A. M. Gavigan, and Jane Jenson. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992.

By Lisa Schmidt

When it comes to abortion, the personal *is* political.

Facing each other in the political arena are two diametrically opposed parties, each with an agenda based on deeply rooted personal beliefs and each speaking a language where the meanings of specific words are chosen to represent these beliefs. For instance, where pro-choice advocates say: woman, the fetus and abortion, pro-life groups say: mother, the unborn and murder.

Hence, in writing *The Politics of Abortion*, authors Janine Brodie, Shelley A. M. Gavigan and Jane Jenson have not only surveyed dozens of legal documents, books and newspaper clippings, they have