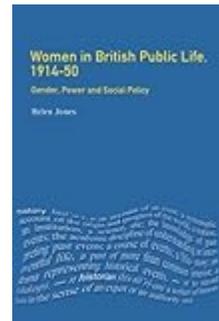




Helen Jones. *Women in British Public Life, 1914-50: Gender, Power and Social Policy.* Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000. x + 260 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-27731-1.



Reviewed by June Hannam (Faculty of Humanities, University of the West of England, Bristol)

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With the increase in the number of women entering Parliament over the last decade the questions raised in Helen Jones book have a particular contemporary relevance. She asks to what extent the achievement of the vote, and women's entry to a range of professions, made a difference to their ability to influence public life in the period 1914 to 1950. Her main aim is to 'provide an analysis of British women's direct role in central government social policy making in an era of major social upheaval and restructuring of welfare provision' (p. 5) when Britain was moving 'towards greater political rights through enfranchisement and more social rights through a state welfare system' (p. 6). She identifies key areas in which women could try to exert an influence—through the civil service, through parliament, through lobbying the government, through professional occupations such as teaching, nursing, medicine and social work and in the promotion of 'charitable services which it was hoped the government would imitate' (p. 6). Three chapters explore all of these areas in the specific context of war and post war reconstruction. A further three chapters—working in education, health and welfare; campaigning against the gendered impact of poverty; Westminster and Whitehall—look at one activity in some depth, with a focus on the inter-war years. An interesting dimension of the book is the concern to look beyond Britain. One chapter is devoted to

a discussion of British women's involvement in the welfare of women and children in other European countries, while a further chapter provides a welcome comparison of women's ability to influence policy making in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Australia and the United States.

Women found it difficult to exert any influence on policymaking in all of the areas considered in this book. The two world wars provided increased opportunities, in particular for middle-class women, to make a difference as nurses, doctors, teachers and social welfare campaigners. Nonetheless, Jones concludes that in the First World War, while they were able to exercise more controls over working-class women, they had little power over men who made policy. In the Second World War, in terms of their numbers and the positions they occupied, women were better placed to make a contribution to governance, but tended to be implementing policies which had already been developed and 'few women were actually involved in the planning of general domestic strategies' (p. 215). A similar conclusion is arrived at in the exploration of women's professional work and their social welfare campaigns. In each case Helen Jones argues that women had informed views on how welfare policies could be developed and delivered, but governments largely ignored them. Jones argues that when women such as Margaret McMillan, Eleanor Rathbone and Marie

Stopes tried to pressurise the government to introduce nursery schools, family allowances and free birth control advice they met with success only when their demands coincided with the interests and needs of the government. In that case the reasons for the introduction of welfare measures tended to be different from those of women campaigners and there was certainly no intention to challenge or rearrange 'traditional' gender relationships within the home. In this instance, however, women's activism did put welfare issues which affected women and children on the political agenda, but since they were not part of the policy making process campaigners could not 'effectively challenge the vested interests and assumptions of policy makers' (p. 100). Women MPs and civil servants had even greater difficulty in exerting an influence over policy making. They were few in numbers and often felt isolated in the male environment of Parliament and Whitehall, while some individual women had little interest in pursuing 'women's issues'. Women MPs did act together on occasion in support of measures which would benefit their sex, but more often than not they were divided by party loyalties. They found the House of Commons a hostile place with few facilities for women, while their own political parties tended to sideline women's issues, in particular during the 1930s, when unemployment, fascism and the threat of war dominated political debate. Women's active role in the provision of welfare services during the period of social reconstruction after both world wars did have some limited success, in particular in small scale welfare projects, but their widespread concern with peace and disarmament had little influence over the development of foreign policy because they were not in positions of power where decisions were taken.

What emerges throughout the book, therefore, is a rather dispiriting catalogue of failures coupled with the government's missed opportunity to harness women's expertise in the field of social welfare at the level of policy making. Helen Jones suggests a number of explanations for this failure. There were too few women who were placed well enough to create networks which 'could effectively challenge and dislodge structures and cultures which operated to women's disadvantage' (p. 7). In most occupations and in government it was men who held positions of power and the male culture which predominated in key institutions meant that the targeting of resources and the aims of welfare rarely took account of women's interests or recognised the unequal, and gendered, distribution of resources in the family. Moreover, women were often divided amongst themselves

over what they regarded as being in women's interests or else did not give priority to 'women's issues'. In her comparison of women's experiences in France, Germany, Italy, Australia and the United States Helen Jones argues that regardless of the nature of the political system and of whether or not women could vote, in all countries there was a similar lack of influence over policy making. She suggests that this demonstrates the importance of prevailing male political cultures in marginalising women and their concerns.

Although the argument that women failed to make an impact at the level of policy making is a convincing one, the emphasis on their failure time and again in every chapter can leave the reader looking for other questions which might have been asked and which might illuminate how women approached their public role as new citizens in the first half of the twentieth century. What did they hope to achieve and why? To what extent did their public campaigning make a difference, both to the issues being addressed, to the terms in which they were discussed and, perhaps in small ways, to the lives of those who were the subject of their activities, in particular at a local level? There is much in the book to interest both students and researchers in the field of gender and social policy. The chapters on women's social work activities in the two world wars, and in European social reconstruction after the wars, are based on extensive research and provide welcome new insights, highlighting organisations such as the Save the Children Fund and the British Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund which are rarely mentioned in standard texts.

On the other hand the book is uneven in the quality and depth of analysis. Many of the problems stem from the Introduction where there is no systematic definition of the terms and approaches which will be used in the book. The wealth of historical and sociological literature on women and social policy receives only a cursory treatment and there is little discussion about how the author intends to assess women's influence and whether or how she intends to group women together for the purposes of analysis. Thus, within a single chapter the author will refer to the activities of individual women, the attitudes of women's groups and the campaigns of feminists taking action either through mixed-sex political parties or through feminist organisations. These different 'groupings' are considered in a rather haphazard way and there is no attempt to discuss, explicitly, the relationship between them and the different meanings that they gave to their activities. This is then made more confusing by a failure to define the terms which are used. At vari-

ous points reference is made to feminists, to maternalist and socialist feminists, to women in the labour movement, to those who took an interest in women's issues and to feminist cultures, but these are not explained and nor are the varied ways in which they related to each other. Too often issues are tantalisingly raised but then not discussed in sufficient depth; for example the extent to which the role of individual women could be important is alluded to (p. 20), but is then followed by a series of potted biographies with no attempt to discuss the influence of specific individuals, or the similarities and differences between them. Why for instance, were so many women from different backgrounds involved in the Save the Children Fund or the campaign for birth control and what were the implications of this? As it stands it is difficult to understand the differences between women since their ideas are rarely discussed in any depth.

The organisation of material within chapters then contributes to the impression of fragmentation and lack of depth. For example, in chapter seven the question of whether women's access to the vote affected their ability to influence social policy in countries outside Britain is explored through one country after another which encourages a descriptive approach. An examination of themes such as the meaning and nature of citizenship and the impact of voting across various countries might have led to more analysis and a greater coherence. Finally, given that the book introduces a great variety of different themes, areas of activity, organisations and individuals it would have been helpful if there had been a longer conclusion which could have drawn the different

parts together and clarified the overall arguments.

Despite these shortcomings Helen Jones's book provides a very useful starting point for undergraduate students and researchers who want to know more about the great variety of organisations and activities relating to social welfare in which women were engaged in Britain between 1914 and 1950. Every chapter provides a helpful synthesis of the secondary literature and introduces the reader to the wealth of primary material on this topic which still needs to be fully explored. Historians have shown an increasing interest over the last decade in women's public life after the vote was won. Helen Jones' emphasis on women's role in social policy making is a useful complement, therefore, to general texts on women's changing social and political role in the period and studies which focus on the organised women's movement. Her conclusions that women need to attack existing political cultures as well as structures if they are to exert influence on policy making, and to refuse to be used by governments unless there is something in it explicitly for them, remind women that 'overall improvements should not distract from patterns of inequality' which still need to be challenged. The difficulties women faced in attempting to influence policy making before 1950 have not gone away, despite the fact that a far larger group of women are now in Parliament and can be found at all levels of the civil service and professional work. They would do well to take account of Helen Jones' final sentence, that 'unless feminist projects are at the centre of government strategy, policies affecting women will not work to their advantage' (p. 245).

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