

**Politics and Promise:
A Feminist-Institutional Analysis of
The Royal Commission on the Status of Women**

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Introduction

Finding the right institutional design for progressive policy change has been vexing for advocates who seek to address or eradicate women's inequalities. Feminists have traversed Westminster customs, partisan aspirations and bureaucratic practices under a political rationality which has stubbornly viewed women as primary care givers, secondary wage earners or household domestics. Yet, there have been moments in Canadian history when a constellation of factors has come together which instigates policy learning and which has dramatically shifted women's circumstances and Canadian socio-political culture. One such event was the work of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW). While it has been remarked by many that commissions can be used by governments to divert controversial issues away from legislatures or to postpone decision making, the RCSW is a fine example of how a commission of inquiry can open up the policy process to the attentive public by providing a forum not under the direct control of government, and a venue to generate policy analysis that is independent and objective, yet public (Aucoin 1990, 197-198; Timpson 1999, 123). As we approach the 40th Anniversary of the release of the RCSW's 1970 final report, it is instructive to look to the RCSW as an important "site of resistance" and the extent to which "citizens use these bodies to challenge dominant ideologies and contest each other's ideas about the appropriate course of policy development" (Timpson 1999, 124).

To undertake this analysis, we employ a theoretical framework which highlights the importance of institutions, not only as mediators of politics, but as entities which perpetuate gendered social relations. To do so, we merge historical new institutionalism with feminism into a feminist-institutional approach to critically assess what happens to women's policy goals once in the arms of the state by linking new institutionalism's focus on meso-level policy institutions with feminism's emphasis on transformational politics.

This paper begins with making the case for a feminist-institutional analysis of the RCSW. We then proceed to investigate the politics of this commission of inquiry – why it was established, how it reoriented Canadian political and social values and galvanized the women's movement to examine the extent to which the promise of the RCSW was achieved.

Gendering the Policy Process – Theoretical and Empirical Considerations

New institutionalism provides theoretical and conceptual encouragement to the study of women's interface with the policy process and the institutions which comprise the governance system. In the new institutional tradition, the approach situates organizations and institutions as key analytical variables which are analyzed for how they structure the policy process to determine, among other factors, relative openness to societal actors. New institutionalism is also analytically beneficial, as Louise Chappell notes, given it is an approach which examines "...the way institutional arrangements shape political behaviour" (2002a, 8). Indeed, institutional rules, practices and value

systems, because they influence and often constrain the behavior of policy actors, are of utmost importance when investigating why, or why not, the policy goals of civil society are successfully achieved.

One particular variant of new institutional, historical institutionalism, has been especially instructive in revealing how institutions mediate politics (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, 3; Thelen 1999) and in highlighting how past choices often hinder future policy and program reforms or institutional change (Wilsford 1994, 251-283). Policy trajectories and path dependencies are of particular interest to groups within civil society who challenge state action or inaction. Organizational cultures, policy frames, formal and informal processes and norms of behavior pose a formidable challenge for women's groups who not only advocate reform, but also wish to contribute to a rewriting of history that counters accepted institutional practices and policy outcomes (Grace 2010). However, as Kathleen Thelen cautions, institutional change can take place even under perceived times of institutional stability or "inertia" (Thelen 1999; Thelen 2004; Streek and Thelen 2005). The analytical endeavor of historical institutionalism is to uncover interactions amongst institutionally located actors, or negotiations within various sites of institutional activity, which open up possibilities of change (Thelen 2004). Moreover, path dependencies can be realigned by critical events given institutions "...evolve in response to changing environmental conditions" (Thelen 1999, 387). Kathleen Thelen also reminds that political systems comprise of layers of institutions (2004). That is, if policy change is not possible within the typical policy process or at the usual level of government (federal or provincial), opportunities may be available at another. Commissions of inquiry, for example, may well be highly successful if struck in response to a critical juncture in political and social debate. As well, commissions can offer an institutional policy space, while temporary, that is apart from the confines of the conventional policy process facilitating interactions between government and social actors to engage in policy discovery.

Why Feminist-Institutionalism?

That said, historical institutionalism, nor any of the varieties of new institutionalism, do not theoretically consider institutions to be gendered, nor does the school of thought empirically analyze institutions of government and the machinery of the bureaucracy as perpetuating gendered power relations. A significant feminist literature in the field of organizational analysis and feminist institutionalism has taken up this task, providing valuable insights into analyzing institutions through a critical feminist lens (Swiebel 1988; Acker 1990; Acker 1992; Goetz 1992; Grant and Tancred 1992; Vickers 1994; Kenney 1996; Staudt 1997; Stivers 2002; Kenny 2007; Waylen 2009; Grace 2010).

From both a methodological and theoretical perspective, bringing feminist theorizing to this understanding of institutions tightens the analytical trajectory. We are able to "unpack institutions to examine power relations among and within institutional parts" (Staudt 1997, 61) thereby conceptualizing institutions as "...instruments of social organization that exercise collective power over a number of generations" (Vickers,

Rankin and Appelle 1993, 133-134). From a feminist point of view, collective power is understood to be stratified by a nexus of oppressions unevenly distributed within society and the economy. In part, this power is embedded in bureaucratic rules and practices located in institutional sites within the state. Gender is conceptualized as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between men and women, and is understood to be a primary way of signifying relationships of power (Scott 1986, 1067). A policy outcome is gendered if "...advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are pattered through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker 1990, 146). A "gendered institution" signifies that gender is present in the "processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power" within that site (Acker 1992, 567).

Moreover, even though a feminist-institutional directs our attention to the institutions and organizations of the state, feminism brings to historical institutionalism a theory and conception of the state that is crucial to understanding women's socio-economic status which are informed by wider gender relations. Indeed, we ultimately must not abandon the state since gender relations "cannot be understood apart from the state, politics and policy; states influence gender relations, and are in turn influenced by gender relations (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999, 10). Moreover, as Camilla Stivers reminds, policy institutions are situated in a modern administrative state which is:

wholly separate from something called the private sphere – we must ask what is obscured as a result of constructing the defending this firm boundary. The public-private distinction has served historically to maintain the perception that there is a clear line between government and business and to justify a realm in which "man" is protected from government interference in his activities. At the same time, the public-private dichotomy has been used to distinguish the household from both government and business activities. Neither distinction has served women well; rather, both have covered up women's needs and made them theoretical anomalies (2002, 34).

A significant aspect of the Canadian state is federalism. As Jill Vickers argued in her seminal gender analysis of the Canadian policy system, federalism is one of the structural barriers women's groups come up against when organizing and advocating their policy goals (Vickers 1994, 141). As a key political and constitutional feature of the Canadian state, women's groups have to organize and lobby both levels of government (and sometimes the municipal level) given the division of powers between the provinces, territories and federal governments. In order to have a substantive response to women's policy needs, both levels are of import given some of the more significant policy areas are under the purview of the provinces (health, education, labour, social assistance, child care, training), while the federal government has the jurisdiction over important policy sectors such as fiscal and monetary policy, as well as financial clout to transfer funds to provinces and territories sometime with conditions attached. As well, federal structures facilitate blame avoidance when governments do not respond to civil society actors as advocated or expected. Moreover, Canadian federalism tends to focus on the territorial actors and policy prescriptions to the exclusion of social actors. Child care, for example,

become much more about who pays and which government is responsible, rather than about the substance of the policy issue and why women demand accessible child care.

Still it is important to disaggregate the state and macro-political institutions to get to the institutions and bureaucratic practices which animate policy development processes. Anne Marie Goetz argues that the often “institutional failure” of public bureaucracies to attend to women’s experiences and social realities may in part be explained by the traditional “technicist” basis of bureaucratic organizations. That is, the practices and internal cultures of these organizations rest on gender neutral principles of merit and assumptions that “neither the sex of bureaucrats, nor of policy recipients, makes a difference to the objectives of policy, to the ways policies are implemented, or to the ways in which the interests of men and women are institutionalized in public administration” (Goetz 1992, 6). And often the interests of women, Nancy Fraser would argue, become depoliticized within bureaucratic structures due to “expert needs talk” or administrative discourses that translate politicized needs into manageable needs. Once in the administrative surround, for example, women’s “need” for child care becomes decontextualized from the socio-cultural experiences of women within their homes and families, and recontextualized within the bureaucratic confine. As a result, expert redefinitions “reposition” the needs of women into individual, managed “cases” as part of universal populations, rather than as “members of social groups or participants in political movements” (Fraser 1989, 179).

These discourses and practices are enduring. Theories of bureaucracy and public administration explain this durability by suggesting that policy developers apply certain terms and categories to maintain the universal formulation and implementation of public policy which serve to maintain the legitimacy of administrative experts in liberal constitutional democracies (Stivers 2002, 41-50). By doing so, bureaucratic objectivity is ensured so that the state acts as a neutral arbiter to ensure that subsequent public policies apply equally to all citizens. In the rational-legal bureaucratic context of the liberal state, practices and policy language are assumed to be uncomplicated and unproblematic.

Many feminists, however, argue that the state does work to the benefit of certain interests and that the objective rational-legal bureaucratic context *is* highly problematic. They offer their own explanation arguing that language must be challenged since it is not a “...neutral and transparent means of representing reality...rather, language is assumed to codify an androcentric world-view” (Ehrlich and King 1998, 165). The feminist project highlights the point that it was men of a particular capital class who had control over “naming” and therefore the institutionalization of “meaning”. Language, then, becomes one expression of gendered social relations which are conveyed by political and policy institutions, subsequently framing public policies. Over time, the overt reasons for the sexist and discriminatory aspects of public policy are sometimes forgotten. The language and meaning, however, persist often under the guise of a gender-neutral, ostensibly objective policy language. Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christina Gabriel found, for instance, that the selection model for new immigrants is highly gendered, and even sustains female dependency, although it is “...not the result of overt discrimination on the basis of sex but rather the way in which rules, regulations, and practices produce different

outcomes for men and women” (2002, 50). One example they demonstrate is how the points system (which determines whether a person is admitted into Canada as an immigrant) takes into account particular types of occupational experiences which when gendered are revealed to favor men’s employment histories and educational backgrounds (in the public sphere) rather than women’s.

Some studies have found, however, that the policy discourse is not necessarily neutral – meaning is attached during the policy process by policy developers often through political direction. My own research in the area of federal child care policy development found that during the Social Security Review in 1994, the Liberal Party government defined and framed child care around promoting “healthy children” rather than about advancing women’s equality as advocated by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (Grace 2010). As well, in her study of violence against women, Andrea Levan recounts how federal public servants framed policy issues quite differently than grassroots women’s groups and how the “bureaucratization of women’s issues” left feminists:

...struggling against an analysis of wife-battering as a phenomenon caused by “individual pathology” or “faulty family interaction,” a view that overlooked the role of misogyny, of women’s economic dependency, of institutions such as the family (seen as private and sacrosanct), and of the widespread acceptance of violence as a way to maintain and control (1996, 329-330).

Derailing or reframing a particular policy language is a challenge once certain ideas and values become embedded within an institutional setting. As Judith Grant and Peta Tancred have argued, state bureaucratic apparatuses are implicated in this gendering because the “structural relations of gender inequality are inscribed in state institutions, policies, and actions” (Grant and Tancred 1992, 117-119). To support their position, they look to the work of Rianne Mahon and her conceptualization of the “unequal structure of representation” which suggests that specific social and economic productive forces are hierarchically structured within the bureaucracy - that is, class contradictions are “inscribed in the very structure of the state” (Mahon 1984, 39). To Grant and Tancred, *dual structures of unequal representation* ensure that, within the *first* structure, women’s voices as a potential counter force, are segregated into women’s policy agencies, and in the *second* unequal structure, women’s unequal socio-economic status is replicated in the “gendered hierarchy” of every department and branch in government (Grant and Tancred 1992). That is to say, unequal structures of representation are institutionalized by the relative powerless position of women’s policy agencies (e.g., women’s policy agencies such as Status of Women Canada, created in response to one of the recommendations of the RCSW) and through the relative powerlessness of women in all government departments and agencies. This “dual structure of unequal representation” is a reflection of women’s inequality within society and the economy.

We now turn to an empirical analysis of the RCSW to assess the outcomes of the commission’s work.

Ideas – Setting the Context

Lester Pearson, Prime Minister at the time, initially hesitated in striking a commission. A number of factors, however, ultimately forced his hand. First, there were political reasons why the Liberal Party government struck the commission. Pearson was keen to maintain stability of his minority government, so he acquiesced to pressure from the NDP's for the establishment of a commission. Moreover, Canada had ratified the ILO Convention in 1964 committing the federal government to promoting equal opportunity and treatment in employment and was increasingly seen as the outlier when other countries, notably the Kennedy administration in Washington DC, had already established a Roundtable on Women (Timpson 2001, 29, Cohen 1993, 5). Significantly, however, were individuals working within the Liberal Party encouraging Pearson to establish a commission, notably Judy LaMarsh, the first woman to serve in a Liberal government cabinet, was Minister of National Health and Welfare from 1963 to 1965 and Secretary of State for Canada from 1965 to 1968 (Cohen 1993, 5).

As well, there were clear policy objectives of import to the Pearson government. Women's paid employment in the labour force had increased dramatically from the 1950s to the end of the 1960s. It made sense, therefore, for the government to investigate how women's employment could, and should, be beneficial to the economy as women clearly represented a growing skilled labour pool (Timpson 2001, 29-30).

While these may have been sufficient conditions, escalating demands from the emergent women's movement propelled the cause onto the public agenda. A coalition of over 30 women's groups had been gathered in 1966 by Laura Sabia to collectively demand for the establishment of a commission. They formed the Committee for the Equality of Women (CEW), with Sabia as national chair, eventually threatening the Pearson government that if a commission was not struck, two million women would march on Parliament Hill (Cohen 1993, 5). Other progressive women made their appeals through the media. Doris Anderson, editor of *Chatelaine*, did so in the July 1966 of the magazine (Timpson 2001, 30). Moreover, the CEW had the support of the newly formed Fédération des femmes du Québec which was a signal to the Liberal government that this was an issue of national political significance (Ibid.).

And feminists - radical, socialist and liberal alike - were organizing across the country to bring to the public's attention the plight of women and critically questioning dominant social and stereotypical conceptions of women. During the lead up to the establishment of the commission, women were written into the welfare state when "the dominant view of work and family life dictated a strict division of labour between the sexes" (Bakker and Scott 1997, 289). After all, the male breadwinner/female housewife-caregiver model was embedded in all post-War capitalist welfare states (Broomhill and Sharp 2005) and was central to welfare state development. Consequently, women were recognized as mothers, wives and dependents – as so-called reproducers – while men were attached to the welfare state as independent breadwinners/fathers and household heads – that is, economically valued producers.

Canadian women, therefore, lacked reproductive choice, did not have access to a national, publicly funded system of child care, were often trapped in the home have sole responsibility for caregiving and other unpaid work, had limited access to matrimonial property, were generally hired and segregated into low-waged, pink ghetto occupations with few career ladders or no equal employment standards. Women were paid less than men, they more often were poorer than men and they were often represented in the media as sexual objects. Women were not encouraged to enter into the halls of power either in public bodies or in the private sector. And depending on where women lived in Canada (e.g., rural or remote communities) or because of their immigration status, aboriginality or ethnicity, many of these issues were even more acute. In essence, the Commissioners had significant work to do. Not only did they have to educate themselves, because so little was known about women's role in society, the economy and decision-making, they had to thoughtfully educate the public to ensure a body of work and a set of recommendations which would have some impact and meaning to policy makers.

It is not a surprise, however, that the ideational framework of the RCSW was clearly cast in terms of liberal human rights (Freeman 1995, 15) which did not examine gendered power relations nor systems of patriarchy. As Annis May Timpson has argued, a human rights framework ensured "that questions about women's status and rights were seen as credible political issues " and indeed, the Committee for the Equality of Women had themselves lobbied the federal government stating in one of their briefs that for women to achieve excellence in public life and private life, the standards of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had to be upheld (Timpson 2001, 28).

Institutions

The RCSW was established on February 16, 1967 to "inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society" (RCSW 1970, vii). Seven individuals were appointed to form the royal commission – five women and two men. Florence Bird, noted journalist, was appointed Chairman. The RCSW worked for three and half years, costing just under 2 million dollars (O'Neill 2003, 3). The final report was submitted to government on September 28, 1970 and tabled in the House of Commons in December 1970. The RCSW made 167 recommendations after an extensive investigation of nine selected areas of importance to women: women and society; women in the economy; education; women and the family; taxation and child care allowances; poverty; participation in public life; immigration and citizenship; and criminal law and women offenders. The Commissioners developed four principles to guide their thinking and analysis: 1) women should be free to take up employment outside the home; 2) the care of children is a responsibility of the family and society; 3) society has a responsibility toward women because of pregnancy and child-birth and therefore special treatment is necessary; and 4) in the interim, women will require special treatment to overcome adverse of discriminatory practices (RCSW1970, xii). The task of the RCSW then was vast and

profound, necessarily meaning a wide array of issues had to be explored in order to capture the lived realities of Canadian women.

To do so, the commissioners directed considered thought into how they were going to undertake their work. A Secretariat had four Research Directors, each assigned a specific policy issue or theme, and a total staff of fifty women (Bird 1997, 185-186). Monique Bégin, later elected to the House of Commons, was Executive Secretary. The Research Directors attended all of the meetings and “wrote and rewrote the drafts of the report” (Bird 1997, 186). The Commission also had at its disposal documents, academic literature and other relevant data and research published on the status of women in Canada and around the world. It became obvious quite soon, however, that more information was required to substantiate material being presented at hearings and in response to where research was needed. The Commission, therefore, commissioned forty studies, eleven of which were published, most of which are today available at the Archives of Canada. In order to ensure wide distribution of the final report, research material and findings of the RCSW was condensed into one volume.

Actors

In order to reach as many people as possible, the Commissioners made a number of interesting decisions to encourage women to give evidence who would not normally lobby government or who were not members of established organizations or associations. The Secretariat prepared a pamphlet providing guidance to potential witnesses on how to write up a brief, which also gave a list of subjects the commission was investigating. More importantly, the Commissioners decided that rather than advertising the call for briefs only in newspapers, the pamphlet would be available in public libraries and grocery stores. Several months were allotted for women to submit briefs and as the months passed, 468 briefs were eventually received along with 1,000 letters of opinion. Public hearings began in April 1968 (Bird 1997, 187-188). Some of the hearings were televised and were held in cities across Canada (14 cities in 10 provinces) at times best suited for women (Arscott 1995, 41). At hearing, 890 witnesses appeared, and those who could not do so in person, were able to talk directly to Commissioners through a “hot-line” telephone service (RCSW 1970, x).

Assessing Policy Change – Politics and Promise

Change was significant, in terms of ideas, institutional renewal and policy reform. The RCSW received tremendous media coverage which “greatly advanced the cause of liberal feminism in Canada by underscoring the very real, difficult and unfair circumstances in which many women found themselves” (Freeman 1995, 13). Even before the RCSW had tabled its final report, the Trudeau government passed an omnibus bill to reform sections of the Criminal Code regarding contraception and abortion in response to concerns voiced during the commission’s hearings (Chappell 2002a, 34). Part of this bill amended the Criminal Code to legalize the dissemination of birth-control information.

Regarding ideas, the RCSW spearheaded a new social consciousness about women's experiences and justifications for advancing women's social and economic security and independence. Its best thought of as representing, in Jane Jensen's words, a replacement paradigm in "developing a classic liberal-feminist analysis about how to generate equality" (1994, 47). As such, the RCSW was a venue for women to represent themselves to the public and to themselves. The RCSW, like other key commissions, are sometimes "not simply conducting an inquiry or choosing policy. They may be involved in generating new representations of history, of the present community and of available futures that both educate and may very well empower" (Ibid., 47-48).

And empower it did, as well as realign relationships between government and the progressive women's movement. The work and recommendations of the RCSW ignited the emergent second wave feminist movement (Cohen 1993; Timpson 1999, 124) and eventually the establishment of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) – a so-called Parliament of Women, originally created to monitor the implementation of the RCSW's recommendations (Vickers, Rankin and Appelle 1993). During the 1970s and 1980s, NAC was at the forefront in advocating for policy reforms to better the lives of women. Feminist activists, most certainly of the liberal feminist persuasion, were viewed with legitimacy and given the ear of government especially during an era of social liberalism and the "Just Society" while Pierre Trudeau was Prime Minister.

From a policy and institutional perspective, change was also clearly evident. While the policy recommendations of the RCSW are far too wide-ranging to outline here, suffice to say that many have been implemented or partially implemented. Notable legislative changes include: equalizing minimum wage rates between men and women, amending the *Unemployment Insurance Act* to allow for maternity leave, amending the Canadian Labour Code to prohibit dismissal or layoff due to pregnancy, modifying the *Indian Act* to restore status to women who married non-aboriginal men and simplifying divorce laws. All trades in the Canadian Armed Forces were opened to women, as were military colleges, student loans were extended to part-time students (many of which are women), educational institutions began offering native studies programs and funds were made available to women's associations to conduct their work.

Institutionally, the RCSW recommended that a Women's Program Secretariat be established in the Privy Council Office and a Women's Co-ordinator appointed in each federal government department, crown corporations and agencies to act as an internal institutional mechanism to advance women's policy issues. It was also recommended that a women's policy agency be established in each province. Largely, these recommendations were implemented, although a co-ordinator for each federal department, agency and bureau was not. Instead, a Minister Responsible for the Status of Women was appointed in 1971, initially headed by a male cabinet minister. Eventually, Status of Women Canada was created in 1973 as was the independent, arms-length Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW). The CACSW became an important inside advocate of women's rights and the feminist project as well as an ally to women's groups.

Overall, policy learning is evident. As noted above, the Commissioners sought out extensive research material to become aware of and understand women's socialized gender roles, their participation in the paid labour force, programs and practices that discriminated against women, and ideas about how women could enjoy full social, political and legal citizenship. This wealth of information and knowledge was transmitted to the public, the media and to policy authorities. The RCSW was, in an important way, responsible for policy and political authorities in taking up the discourse of women's equality, even if actual policy development was not forthcoming. As well, one might argue that policy learning emanating from the RCSW paved the way for the future women's organizing and perhaps even the insertion of the equality clause in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Unfinished Issues

There is, however, significant work to be done to further dismantle discriminatory practices and to ensure federal and provincial governments substantively respond to women's policy demands. As noted, the RCSW employed a human rights ideational framework which guided much of the commission's thinking. It has, of course, been criticized by radical and socialist feminists for not analyzing why some women are unable to take up equal opportunity initiatives and for not invoking a critical discourse to understand the consequences capitalism, patriarchy and unequal power relations between men and women (Timpson 1999, 124; Freeman 1995). This is evident when considering the RCSW's recommendation regarding women's poverty. The Guaranteed Annual Income has never been implemented nor ever seriously debated in Ottawa, nor have women access to a national child care system even after years and years of study demonstrating the social and economic benefits of such a policy. Moreover, violence against women was not analysed by the RCSW, nor were issues of import to lesbians and trans-gendered persons. As many have remarked, the RCSW was a product of its times.

Moreover, since the rise of a neo-liberal political rationality which either ignores issues of gender or views women's interests as "special interests", some of the work of the RCSW has been undone or is in danger (Brodie 2008; Brodie 1998). The CACSW was disbanded in the mid-1990s by the Chretien Liberal government and Status of Women Canada, the lead policy agency, has suffered budget and staff cuts since the 1980s. The Canada Assistance Plan, the hallmark of Canada's welfare state and commitment to facilitating the "Just Society", was disbanded in favour of a block fund which has done little to ensure policy development for women at the provincial level. As well, under the mantra of open federalism and respecting provincial jurisdiction, successive governments since the Liberal Party was elected in 1993 has meant that there has been no sustained effort to co-ordinate intergovernmental relations in policy areas or funding mechanisms of significance to women. So while a discourse of women's rights may once have prevailed, it has now been supplanted with a focus on human rights which, on a case by case basis, is not necessarily problematic. It is so, however, when gender discourse and issues of importance to women become ignored, framed within a political dialogue which views the women's equality agenda as complete.

Conclusion: Evaluating the Effectiveness of The RCSW

The RCSW transcended established policy processes which allowed many Canadian women to take an active, empowering role in educating the Commissioners, the public and themselves. Women from across the country, some feminists likely many not, told their stories of strife, poverty, sexism and isolation. It truly was a site of resistance – a forum that allowed the imparting of experiences and information that would not have taken place via established policy development processes. The women who gave briefs and shared their stories with the Commissioners helped shape policy discourses for years to come. Path dependences, that is, ideas about how royal commissions are usually conducted, were derailed as were ideas about women either as primary caregivers and policy recipients.

Frank Iacobucci has argued that one test of whether a commission has been successful is whether the interests of key individuals were properly considered and represented (Iacobucci 1990, 26). The RCSW passes this test. While it is important to note that there was some criticism that the diversity of Canadian women was not necessarily represented as it could have been, the commission nonetheless heard from many women and was the first royal commission headed by a woman, largely staffed and comprised of women (Arscott 1995, 38-40). Ultimately, as this paper has hopefully demonstrated, the results of the RCSW speak loud. If the key question is whether commissions of inquiry can instigate change, when considering the RCSW, the answer is a resounding “yes”.

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