Gendering the Institutional Politics of Welfare Reform in the UK

Claire Annesley

Politics, School of Social Science
University of Manchester, M13 9PL

claire.annesley@manchester.ac.uk

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Abstract
Recent processes of welfare reform in countries such as the UK have significantly re-gendered welfare states, most notably by transforming them from male breadwinner to adult-worker model welfare systems. The process of welfare reform offers a prime example of how feminism encounters institutions: it shows how feminist actors use their agency in institutions to shape policy outcomes within the framework of a gendered welfare state; it demonstrates how feminists interact with gendered formal and informal institutions to achieve their goals; and it reveals the gendered nature of power relations within political institutions. Building on recent feminist contributions to institutional analyses, this article utilises empirical research conducted on the reform of maternity and paternity leave legislation in the UK to make the case that key feminist actors in political and civil society institutions successfully shaped formal and informal institutions. This case study will help to develop the case for a feminist institutionalism and a theory of feminist institutional change.
Introduction - Feminist Institutionalism: Gender, Power and Change

As scholars of Feminist Institutionalism point out, both political science and feminism have taken an institutional turn (Kenny 2007). Political science moved towards new institutionalism to explain entrenched power structures and patterns of behaviour. The three new institutionalisms (rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism and historical institutionalism) were developed to bring institutions into political analysis and to help explain how institutions structure and stabilise political action (Hall and Taylor 1996).

The approach adopted by the three new institutionalisms helped feminists to explain the gendered nature of power in various institutional settings and why gendered power relations are hard to alter. Yet, at the same time, feminist political science has moved from a focus on the gendered nature of power in politics (a status) to the gendering of political institutions (a transformative process) (Beckwith 2005). Feminist political science is no longer just about women’s presence in parliament, but about the impact women can make to the gendered nature of institutions, practices and policy outcomes.

However, the new institutionalist approach is largely static rather than dynamic and has little to say about the transformation of or change in political institutions. Indeed, rational choice institutionalism emerged to make sense of why, if political actors are rational and self-seeking, and given the multiplicity of individual preference, outcomes are so stable (Schmidt 2006: 9). Sociological institutionalism, too, can be ‘too static or equilibrium-focussed, and unable to account for change over time’ (Schmidt 2006: 9). Historical institutionalism for its part follows the logic of path dependency: that political options on offer today are shaped by the decisions made in the past. For all three new institutionalisms, change is difficult or not foreseen. If it happens, it tends to be triggered by an exogenous force, not by political agency from within. What is more, even if formal institutions change, informal institutions can be tenacious.

This shortcoming of the new institutionalisms presents a problem for feminism, which has a transformative agenda, that is to alter the gendered power dynamics of political, social institutions (including the family) and to produce more gender equality. One task of feminist institutionalism, then, is to develop a theory of feminist institutional change:
how feminist interaction with an institution can trigger institutional change and alter a
gendered institutional framework. The aim of this article is to contribute to this
scholarship with a case study of the gendered reform of the welfare state in the United
Kingdom (UK). Empirically, the article draws on policy reviews and interviews
conducted for an ESRC-funded research project, *Gendering Welfare Reform in Adult Worker
Model Welfare States: The UK*.\(^1\) Theoretically it makes a contribution to a theory of
feminist institutional change.

**Feminist Historical Institutionalism and Institutional Change**

This article adopts a historical institutionalist (HI) approach to understanding political
and policy stability and change. The underlying assumption of HI is that formal and
informal institutions are set by decisions made in the past. Any change to institutions
tends to follow the trajectory set by past decisions (path dependency). Institutional
change is possible but on the whole it is slow and incremental in nature. However
exogenous shocks to an institutional system, such as wars or revolutions, can create
critical moments or windows of opportunity wherein change is rendered more likely.

Political actors can seize these critical moments - if sufficiently mobilised and organised -
to implement significant institutional change, which can lead to a critical juncture where
institutional development deviates considerably from its previous institutional path. For
example, crisis (or the perception of crisis) in an institution might be the exogenous
factor which triggers institutional change (Wilkinson 2006). Transitions to democracy
represent another such opportunity (Waylen 2007).

However, even though formal institutions may change, informal institutions are tenacious
(North 1990). The norms and values which underpin a formal institutional framework
take longer to alter and may even persist after formal institutional structures have
changed. Informal institutional legacies endure and new formal institutions do not operate
on a clean slate. For Schmidt, altering discourse is a central dimension to bringing about

\(^1\) ESRC award reference RES-000-22-1615. For more details see.
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Minisite/annesley/index.html
institutional change. This she refers to as discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2006, Annesley 2006).

A feminist approach to analysing institutional change needs to take into account this historical institutionalist understanding of political structures and the opportunities for institutional change. Feminist historical institutionalism would recognise that institutions embody strong gendered power dynamics and that gendered institutions comprise both formal elements and informal rules. The formal institutions are the social, political, administrative and policy structures which set out the rules of the game. The informal elements are the gendered norms and beliefs that underpin these formal institutions.

These gendered institutions are generally stable and follow a path dependent trajectory. A feminist project to transform them has to be understood as a long-term strategy of incremental change. Feminist campaigns can alter formal and informal institutional configurations. The aim of feminists would be to gradually alter the gendered dynamics of formal and informal institutions from the inside and the outside.

An exogenous shock might create a change in the power structures and present an opportunity for more radical, path-altering institutional reform. This might take the form of a transition to democracy (Waylen 2007) or the election of a new government (Annesley, Gains and Rummery 2007). Feminist campaigning might be seen as an exogenous shock in its own right. However, feminists can also be understood as comprising part of the institution. For example, state feminism demonstrates how feminists take roles in formal state institutions to feminise institutions and policy (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995, Kantola and Outshoorn 2007). Also feminists as citizens are integral parts of institutions such as the welfare state. Incremental changes in women’s behaviour, for example, in the family or by aspiring to go out to work, can lead to incremental institutional change in the welfare state or the labour market.

On account of the path dependent and tenacious nature of formal and especially informal institutions, feminist campaigns for institutional change need to be conceived of as long-term strategies. Conceptualising feminism as an external shock implies that their role is a one-off one. In fact it is part of an on-going process of campaigning. The critical thing is
for this to be sustained over time, particularly following major the institutional change implied by a critical juncture.

A feminist theory of institutional design or reform will recognise that social institutions are not independent from one another but are interrelated. There are interlinkages, for instance, between the labour market, the welfare state and citizenship and institutional change in one will rely on or trigger change in another (Gatens 1998). It will also recognise the family as a social rather than a private institution which is interlinked with and underpins the gender structure of other institutions. The gendered norms and behaviours embedded in the family will, for example, structure the gendered dimensions of the labour market, welfare state, citizenship and legal system (Gatens 1998).

Finally, contrary to the assumptions of rational choice and game theoretical versions of institutional design and reform which are based on the concept of the self-interested rational actor, feminist understandings of political action are underpinned by the concepts of connection, trust and co-operation (Gatens and Mackinnon 1998: xiii).

Gendered Institutional Change: Male Breadwinner (MBW) to Adult Worker Model (AWM) welfare state

Feminist scholarship on the welfare state highlights the fact that it is a highly gendered institution. Formal and informal institutions of the welfare state mark out the respective roles for men and women. Feminist literature mainly highlights the welfare state as a (patriarchal) institution which shapes the fate of women as citizens and recipients of welfare benefits and services. There is a historical literature on the agency of women in shaping the foundations of welfare states (Koven and Michel 1990; Lewis 1994; Skocpol 1992; Skocpol and Ritter 1991) but nothing that looks at women’s political agency in the current phase of welfare reform.

The welfare state comprises a network of formal institutions which structure (policies) and govern (political and administrative systems) the welfare state and a series of informal institutions (norms and values) which underpin it. Most models of welfare capitalism developed in the post-1945 era as Male Breadwinner welfare states (MBW).
This social system assumed full-time, life-long employment for a male wage earner with a female responsible for caring for children and other dependants. In the MBW welfare state, women accrued social rights via their spouse and, in the absence of a male breadwinner, for example in the event of his death or divorce, the state was willing to step in. Lewis (1992) characterised Western welfare states according to the degree to which the welfare state is prepared to support a woman independent of a male breadwinner labelling countries as weak, moderate or strong male breadwinner welfare states. Sweden counted as an example of a weak MBW welfare state, France as a moderate, and Germany and the UK as strong.

Advanced welfare states are currently undergoing a transformation from MBW welfare states in the direction of a new model which Lewis (2001) refers to as the Adult Worker Model (AWM). This emerging model is based on the assumption that all adults - male and female - are expected to take paid employment in order to secure an independent economic existence. The AWM welfare state assumes that all adults should take employment, and that in families there will be two earners; in single parent households, the adult should also take up employment.

The shift from a MBW in the direction of the AWM welfare state could be explained by a range of exogenous factors: socio-economic change, the need for female employment to sustain economic growth, the changed aspirations of educated women. But these are not alone sufficient to explain shifts in formal and informal institutions – policies, political and administrative systems and norms and values – which by definition perpetuate the status quo.

Indeed, welfare state reform in the direction of the AWM can take a series of manifestations. Lewis (2001) offers two examples of AWM welfare states: the USA and Sweden. Both embody a strong expectation that women and men should work but they differ in the institutional support offered to them to make work financially worthwhile and the combination of work and family life compatible. In the USA, there is, in short, no institutional support: workers need to rely on the market for solutions to work-life dilemmas. In Sweden, by contrast, a system of support for families has been constructed, which takes the form of childcare and generous family leave policies.
The UK is a welfare state currently undergoing the transition from a MBW to an AWM welfare state (Lewis 2001; Annesley 2007). As a welfare state classified in the literature as predominantly liberal, a fair assumption might be that it follows the same path as the USA: leaving family policies to the market. Yet, the reverse is the case. Since 1997 successive New Labour governments have implemented policies not only to get women into employment but also to make work pay, facilitate the combination of work and family responsibilities, and compensate pensioners for time taken out of the labour market for caring (Annesley 2007; Annesley, Gains and Rummery 2007).

Evidence of Gendered Institutional Change: Welfare reform under New Labour

The major gender transformation of the UK welfare state followed the election of New Labour in 1997. This was the change in power dynamics in the UK which presented a critical moment or window of opportunity for feminist campaigners advocating a regendering of the welfare state. Over the next ten years a series of reforms were implemented which altered not only the policies and political/administrative structures of the welfare state but also the norms and values which underpin it.

In terms of policies, these can be classified as those which seek to get women into employment, those which make work financially worthwhile and those which make easier the reconciliation of work and family life. Policies to get women into employment include welfare to work schemes such as the New Deal, the New Deal for Lone Parents in particular, and initiatives for women returners to the labour market. Policies to make work pay range from the National Minimum Wage (currently £5.52 per hour for workers aged 22 years and older) to in-work tax credits to the removal of the tax allowance for married women. Policies to improve the compatibility of work and family life include a national childcare strategy, the right of some parents and carers to request flexible employment and – crucially for this article - the extension of maternity leave and pay and the introduction and extension of paid paternity leave.

Since coming to power in 1997 the New Labour government has legislated to improve family policy in a number of areas. A first wave of reforms included the introduction of 13 weeks’ unpaid parental leave, the introduction of two weeks’ paid paternity leave, the
extension of paid maternity leave to six months and the entitlement to a further six unpaid
months maternity leave and the right for parents with children under the age of five to
request flexible working arrangements. A second wave of reforms extended the provision
of paid maternity leave from six to nine months (with plans to go to twelve), extended the
right to request flexible work to more carers and announced the intention to allow
mothers to transfer the second six months of maternity leave and pay to fathers.

In terms of political and administrative structures, the government set up a Women’s Unit
which later became the Women and Equality Unit. It also introduced the governance tool
of mainstreaming to bring a gender equality angle to all welfare (and other mainstream)
policies (Squires and Wickham-Jones 2004). More crucially, New Labour governments
comprised record numbers of women Members of Parliament, some of whom were
feminists and some of whom gained ministerial posts.

In terms of the norms and values of the welfare state, the shift has been from one which
promoted women’s employment but offered no institutional support for this, leaving
solutions to the market, to one which supports women’s employment with the range of
policies outlined above. As such the move is away from a gender neutral or gender blind
welfare state which sees workers as genderless citizens towards a gender-aware welfare
state which recognises the impact of caring roles on (predominantly) women’s capacity to
engage with paid employment.

This new gender aware welfare state could – and has – taken various incarnations
(Annesley 2007). A gender difference welfare state recognises the impact of caring roles
on women’s employment and compensates women for this, in the form of, for example,
extended maternity leave. A gender equality welfare state in contrast compensates both
men and women for the burden of caring work in an attempt to redistribute the burden on
unpaid work in the household. This is done, for example by offering parental leave to
both men and women or both maternity and paternity leave. The norm of the UK welfare
state shifted initially to one supporting gender difference (e.g. more generous maternity
leave and pay), but this is still in flux, with signs of a shift to a gender equality welfare
state (e.g. plans for an extension of paternity leave / transferable maternity leave)
(Annesley 2007).
Explaining Gendered Institutional Change: the crucial role of feminist actors and advocacy coalitions in the reform of the UK welfare state

This regendering of the UK welfare state is not simply the consequence of the election of New Labour, which is, despite some claims\(^2\) not inherently feminist (Annesley and Gains 2007). Rather, it is the consequence of long-term campaigning by a coalition of feminists in the Labour Party and the labour movement, committed to make welfare policy more women friendly. This advocacy coalition developed in the 1980s and 1990s to campaign predominantly for better representation of women’s issues in the Labour Party (Lovecy 2007). Prior to election, they were successful at getting policies for better political representation introduced (e.g. the All Women Short Lists) but had less success in getting substantive policy change on the books. However, on election, members of this broad coalition of feminists were well-placed across the political institutions, as MPs, ministers, policy advisors, political secretaries, lobbyists in stakeholder groups, to push for piecemeal but sustainable policy and institutional reform.

Crucially for any policy reform in a polity such as the UK, feminist ministers made it to the ranks of the cabinet. Patricia Hewitt was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry 2001-2005, a major ministerial role. Significantly, she was also Cabinet Minister for Women and, during this time, the Women and Equality Unit was located in her Department for Trade and Industry (DTI). During her time as DTI minister, she oversaw a major reform of the welfare state which extended the rights to request flexible employment and the right to paid maternity leave. In 2005 the DTI launched the Work and Families: Choice and Flexibility consultation. whose purpose was to field views on four broad sets of proposals: 1/ on the best way to implement the government’s commitment to extend paid maternity leave from six to nine to twelve months; 2/ on how to improve the communication between employers and employees taking maternity leave; 3/ on how best to introduce a law to enable mothers to transfer proportions of their maternity leave and pay to fathers and 4/ on whether to extend the right to demand flexible work arrangements to other carers.

\(^2\) In 2005 Tessa Jowell referred to New Labour as the ‘most feminist Government in our history’.

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Hewitt was clearly an actor with a mission to drive though policy change, and was driven by her commitments to feminism and gender equality. A committed feminist activist from the 1970s, she had campaigned for years on work-life balance issues. Her 1993 book *About Time: The Revolution in Work and Family Life* (1993) set out the case for ‘making it possible for women and men to organise their lives in different ways at different stages of their lives’ which she saw as ‘absolutely essential in creating equality between men and women’ (Interview 13). Similar ideas were spelled out in *Social Justice: Strategies for national renewal* (1994), the final report of the Commission on Social Justice, which set out New Labour’s direction and of which Hewitt was deputy chair.

According to one former special advisor, Hewitt was a long time campaigner on women’s and work-life balance policy, and these issues were ‘her true passion’ (Interview 2). As DTI minister she was adamant that these reforms would happen. Another former advisor stated that Hewitt ‘decided very early on what she was going to do as cabinet minister for women. The officials were saying there are many more issues than this, and Patricia was arguing that there isn’t’ (Interview 12). ‘I think it took her to really drive this on to [the DTI’s] agenda. They saw it initially as a sort of sideline. It took her saying “this is what I am going to do; this is what is going to happen” ’ (Interview 12). Hewitt herself said, ‘I came in with a clear sense that [making progress on work-life balance policies] was one of the things I was going to do and in my dual role [as DTI minister and minister for women] it became my number one priority’ (Interview 13).

The importance of Hewitt’s commitment to feminist policy is widely recognised in the policy community. One officer in the Equal Opportunities Commission claimed that ‘people like Patricia Hewitt and Beverley Hughes are so important because they are much more committed to women’s equality than other ministers’ (Interview 1). A TUC secretary said that because Hewitt was a feminist, work-life balance policy was her ‘natural agenda’ (Interview 5). An activist for the Women’s Budget Group said that ‘having someone in government who was aware of those arguments already can only have helped’ (Interview 3).
Yet while Hewitt is singled out and praised for her commitment to this agenda, the significant factor seems to be that the DTI was headed up by a senior female and feminist minister. An officer from the EOC said that ‘people like Patricia Hewitt and Beverley Hughes are so important because they are much more committed to women’s equality than other ministers’ (Interview 1). Similarly, a former special advisor to Hewitt argued that ‘if Tessa Jowell had been in that role, or Harriet Harman, the same things would have happened because there are a set of women right at the top who had genuinely worked a good deal of their lives for these issues’ (Interview 12). Margaret Hodge argued that Patricia Hewitt was certainly ‘important’ in pushing through the work-life balance reforms, but that ‘she could have been bolder’ (Interview 7). Speaking for the senior feminists in the party she said, ‘I think we wanted her to go further’ (Interview 7). But Hewitt was ‘cautious of business: she was doing it in the DTI’ (Interview 7).

The feminist restructuring of the administrative institutions assisted Hewitt’s cause. As Hewitt states ‘I had the perfect opportunity when I became both Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Cabinet Minister for Women with the WEU moving into the DTI. We had the perfect opportunity to move that agenda forward’ (Interview 12). She continues, ‘I would have done it anyway because I had the policy responsibility as trade and industry secretary. But it just made it a bit easier as I had a group of officials in the WEU who were reinforcing the work that was needed at the official level and I had that extra position in government which meant that I could reach out […] and I could think very clearly about how to move forward on the equality agenda’ (Interview 12).

A former special advisor to Hewitt said ‘I think that Patricia being given the agenda as Minister for Women with DTI was an important factor [in pushing for policy change] because suddenly she was there with the machinery of government that had the capacity to put these policies together and she’s there as a minister for women essentially so it becomes about work productivity as well as about women. It became more central’ (Interview 13). The same former special advisor notes that ‘[policy change] would have happened without the WEU, but we got it more cemented because of them’.

Patricia Hewitt’s strength was not solely that she was a feminist actor committed to change or that she held two complementary ministerial posts simultaneously. Her ability
to drive through policy change was as much associated with the fact that she worked hard with policy communities – both internal and external – to build coalitions for change. Internally, Hewitt’s approach was to build strong support within her own Department as well as broad consensus on policy issues across government. Externally, she worked hard with stakeholder and lobby groups, both those who had traditional links with the DTI – business and union stakeholder groups – and also maternity, parenting and gender equality groups.

Hewitt recalls, ‘what I said was that everybody has to sign up to this package or otherwise we wouldn’t be able to make this work. I said to them that this is going to happen and we’re going to put the Bill through, but the only way we’re going to do it is if everyone signs up to the proposition’ (Interview 13).

Internally, Hewitt built a strong team of officials – the Working Families Team – to work on the work-life balance policy proposals. Crucially, this was drawn from DTI and WEU officials. A former special advisor said that ‘the officials embraced this [agenda] whole heartedly at the level of the team. When the team was created together they were really on the same side. They had huge access to the cabinet minister. They were a junior team but they became central. Patricia pushed them hard’ (Interview 12). Hewitt noted that within the team she had ‘a very good permanent secretary who was seized by gender/diversity issues [and] some very good women officials’ and that she never experienced any resistance from the DTI on this policy agenda (Interview 13). A former special advisor reckoned that ‘if you were to talk with the officials that were there at the time then they would confirm that we were all in it together [a fact] that was very important’ (Interview 12).

Across government, Hewitt worked hard to gain support from Number 10 and The Treasury and sustained or built strong alliances with other female ministers. Many of these links were based on long-term alliances from years of campaigning in the Labour Party. Margaret Hodge recalls how Hewitt ‘used to have regular lunches with women ministers to talk about these issues’ (Interview 6). This alliance formed the basis of ‘persistent campaigning’ to persuade Blair and Brown to the importance of these policy issues. As one female minister pointed out, Blair and Brown ‘felt uncertain in the first
year or so. After that it didn’t feel like a battle, just a persistent campaigning’ (Interview 10).

It was harder to persuade Blair, described by Hodge as ‘sceptical’, of the importance of these issues. A former advisor to Hewitt singled out Sally Morgan, at the time Minister for Women and Director of Government Relations to Blair in Number 10, as having a ‘huge influence in getting this policy agreed and through. Her being in Number 10, right hand to the Prime Minister, was important’ (Interview 12). Other feminists in Number 10 such as Carey Oppenheim were also perceived as vital in persuading No 10 of the importance this agenda (Interviews 2 and 12).

Brown is described as being more ‘receptive’ (Interview 7) and ‘understanding’ (Interview 11) to this policy agenda. Hughes says that ‘we were not pushing against closed door. There was real understanding from the Treasury that we had to have a comprehensive policy including these issues if we wanted to help families at the margins’ (Interview 7). According to a former special advisor, ‘Gordon was a positive force on this. He didn’t push back’ (Interview 12). Moreover, Dawn Primarolo in the Treasury was a critical ally and ‘was pushing hard on her agenda on welfare reform’ (Interview 12). ‘The policy was created in the DTI but it had to be agreed through Number 10 and 11. To have someone at senior level helping this along by making this easy to take in was key’ (Interview 12).

Outside government, Hewitt worked painstakingly to gain support from stakeholder and lobby groups. Her approach was to foster long-term support for the policy agenda and to engender a lasting cultural shift of work-life balance issues. A former special advisor noted that ‘we had [the different groups] all together and Patricia got them to understand that it required everybody to be on board to get this through’ (Interview 12). The same advisor remembers how ‘we worked very hard with the CBI and others. We had many fora and meetings to pull together the different forces and to get the compromise. If we didn’t get business on board [Hewitt] knew we wouldn’t get it through. She worked very hard with all these groups and I spent a lot of my time keeping the lines open between the various different groups’ (Interview 12).
At the same time, representatives from the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) and women’s and equality groups found Hewitt and her team to be exceptionally receptive to their lobbying. As a representative from the Women’s Budget Group (WBG) put it, ‘the DTI became a comfortable place to be a feminist lobbyist during the time that [Hewitt] was there’ (Interview 3). Representatives from the WBG and TUC both praised the team for the quality of their approach: ‘The group in the DTI that dealt with this area […] were quite good’ (Interview 3); ‘the working families team and the DTI have consulted with all the time and they’re extremely nice, good people who have been keen to listen to us so I have had several meetings with that team’ (Interview 5). Indeed Hewitt called quarterly meetings with the TUC women’s committee ‘because she wanted to know what the women in the trade unions were thinking. Hewitt always felt that she heard a lot from the men in the trade unions but not much from the women’ (Interview 5). A representative from Working Families said that the DTI ‘has been very good, partly because Patricia had been working with parents’ groups and being constructively supportive of the reforms and reporting to us about regulations and asking for our comments’ (Interview 10).

Moreover, in 2004 Hewitt instigated a series of ten roundtables over a three month period to gauge the impact of the 2003 work-life balance reforms on employers and parents. Participants were selected with the help of intermediary organisations, such as Sure Start, and representative bodies and parents, employers and other organisations were invited to attend the meetings. In June 2004 the DTI invited a citizen’s jury of 16 people in Nottingham ‘to consider how people balance family and work responsibilities, the legislation and costs involved, and make recommendations to Government’ (Interview 8).

Hewitt remembers how she ‘had to put a great deal of personal pressure on individuals to make the final compromises that got the package agreed’. Crucially, the fact that she had ‘25-30 years of relationships with almost all of them was easier and it meant that we ended up with a much more radical package that we might have done if we had done it in a much more traditional way’ (Interview 13).

Conclusion
This article has argued that the shift of the UK welfare state from a strong Male Breadwinner Model to a supported Adult Worker Model system is represents a major institutional shift, in terms of policies, structures and underpinning norms and values. This shift, which occurred following the election of New Labour in 1997, should not be understood as the automatic consequence of the change in political power or as the result of general exogenous factors. Rather, it is sustained feminist campaigning for a gendered reform of the welfare state that led to major institutional change.

There are three major contributions in this article to the feminist institutionalist scholarship. To adjust the gender power structures of institutions, feminist interaction with the institutional structure has to 1/ be long-term and persistent and 2/ be collective rather than individual and 3/ simultaneously target numerous interlinked institutions, from the family upwards.

This article has demonstrated that feminist interaction with institutions can lead to minor and major institutional change, both formal and informal. Persistent mobilising and campaigning on the part of feminists can trigger incremental adjustments. Changes in political opportunities, for example the election of a new government, can open the door to more major institutional realignment. Following such a critical juncture, further incremental change is possible and perhaps easier to implement in the context of an altered institutional path. However, it is crucial that the feminist campaigning is continued. Feminist interaction with institutions is not an exogenous shock in its own right as feminists are integral parts of institutional structures and norms and feminist change of institutions will only occur if feminist campaigning is ongoing and persistent, both prior to and following a critical moment.

What is more, successful transformation of institutions is dependent upon broad alliances of feminists across institutions. Women’s substantive representation in parliament (Childs 2004) or women’s policy agencies (Stetson and Mazur 1995; Kantola and Outshoorn 2007) is important, but alone not sufficient or powerful enough to engender wholesale institutional change. It is crucial for feminists to gain access to those institutions that wield power, in particular the core executive (Annesley and Gains 2008). Lone feminists or feminist ‘critical actors’ (Childs and Krook 2006) can make a difference (Childs and
Whithey 200X) but, as the case of Patricia Hewitt shows, this can not be done in isolation from other feminist and non-feminist actors positioned strategically across the policy making community.

As this article demonstrates, what is required is the connection, trust and co-operation of a broad-based feminist advocacy coalition (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Abrar, Lovenduski and Margetts 2000) and some strategically placed feminist actors. In the case presented in this article, the feminist advocacy coalition that transformed the UK welfare state was one that had built up over 15-20 years while Labour was in opposition. As a former special advisor to Patricia Hewitt put it, ‘it’s not a coincidence that once in government in positions of power [these women] took the steps they needed to to turn these [plans] into policies’ (Interview 12). The challenge now is to see that this coalition is sustained for future pushes to reform.

Finally, reform of the welfare state in this case entailed institutional reform in a number of institutions including the welfare state, the labour market and, crucially, the family. Conceiving of and implementing reform which ultimately allows men and women time out from the labour market to care for children aims to adjust the gendered dynamics of the family unit in which it is traditionally and principally women who undertake caring roles.

The gendered institutional transformation of the welfare state in the UK has been gradual and piecemeal, frustrating many feminists. But the outcome is wholesale reform, altering formal and more tenacious informal institutions for the long-term. An indication that the regendering of the welfare state has become embedded is given by the way in which women’s and family policies have been adopted by the Conservative Party which conventionally values the ‘traditional’ family unit and market forces. Since the start of 2008, David Cameron’s Conservatives have announced that they will: give one third of jobs in a first government to women; become a ‘beacon of best practice’ for equal pay and women; and put the family at the centre of Conservative party politics.

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