



December 2004

## **Review of *Western Welfare in Decline: Globalization and Women's Poverty*. Catherine Kingfisher. Reviewed by Silvia Borzutzky.**

Silvia Borzutzky  
*Carnegie Mellon University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, Growth and Development Commons, and the Social Work Commons

### **Recommended Citation**

Borzutzky, Silvia (2004) "Review of *Western Welfare in Decline: Globalization and Women's Poverty*. Catherine Kingfisher. Reviewed by Silvia Borzutzky.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol31/iss4/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



people with disabilities, he does not share with readers a vision for the future, for a society in which all people have access not only in terms of architectural barriers, accommodations at work and on airplanes, and support programs, but in which they are truly integrated into the fabric of our culture and society. Building a disability community, and partaking fully and completely in the wider community that is our society, is a challenge certainly worthy of further attention and exploration!

Juliet C. Rothman

University of California, Berkeley

Catherine Kingfisher, *Western Welfare in Decline: Globalization and Women's Poverty*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. \$49.95 hardcover, \$21.95 papercover.

The reduction of welfare budgets has been at the forefront of policy agendas of governments throughout the world and has also been consistently recommended by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Catherine Kingfisher's edited book places the reductions in welfare programs in the context of neo-liberalism, globalization, and the feminization of poverty. *Western Welfare in Decline* is a very valuable contribution to the literature of these topics.

First and foremost, what the book emphasizes is that welfare reforms taking place in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand are an intrinsic part of the processes of neo-liberalism and globalization. As such, both the reforms and their consequences for poor women should be analyzed globally. Interestingly, the authors analyze not only the policies enacted in each country, but they also analyze the discourses behind those policies. The book's chapters cover at least five different subtopics: neo-liberal policy analysis; globalization; welfare state reform, global poverty; and the feminization of poverty.

The chapter authors rightly point to the fact that neo-liberalism is not just an economic idea. On the contrary, it includes a set of social prescriptions that deal with both the public and private sphere. Neo-liberalism dictates what kinds of subjects we should be. Additionally, it is responsible for the establishment of

a minimalist state; and has resulted in a definition of the poor as irrational, and of poor single mothers as “normative strangers” who are not fully human, and whose subjectivity needs to be reformed. Consequently, neo-liberalism seeks to turn poor mothers into degendered workers who do not receive provisions for child care and who must work to reform themselves.

Globalization, the twin companion of neo-liberalism, is characterized by a reduction/destruction of welfare state institutions. According to the authors, women have been most affected by the entire globalization of the market ideology and its policies. One of the book’s most important contributions is its discussion of the cultural constructs of globalization and its analyses of the accompanying discourses, which have transformed welfare from a right into a sickness. Both in the US and abroad, welfare recipients are labeled as dependents who suffer from an addiction that can only be cured by the market. At the same time, they are blamed for the suffering economy. What the book points out is that the entire process of globalization depends on the availability of cheap, mostly female, labor. Thus while the state demands that women be active contributors to the economy and hence the process of globalization, it robs them of the few rights they had acquired in the past (such as the right to stay home and care for their families while receiving a small pension). Globalization forces women to be simultaneously at home caring for their families while working outside of the house.

The chapters focused on specific countries demonstrate the contradictions and abuses of the process of welfare reform. Judith Goode’s discussion of the US Welfare Reform Act of 1986 (PRWORA) successfully shows how a racialized discourse reinforced the image of the black woman as someone who is “dependent” on welfare and who needs to be reformed through “tough love.” This rhetoric, of course, failed to recognize the reality of social and political disempowerment. Goode points out that, in practice, the welfare-to-work programs—the foundation of the Reform Act—condemn women and their families to eternal poverty and not eternal salvation.

The reforms in the other countries analyzed in the book also conspire against women. In Canada, increases in poverty in the last twenty years have truly meant increases in the female wage

gap and have resulted in increased numbers of poor women. In Britain, reforms have been centered around single mothers, who, in the eyes of legislators, are responsible for the breakdown of the family (as if fathers had nothing to do with it); a gendered labor market; reductions in welfare spending; and the need to reduce welfare dependency. In Australia, reductions in welfare spending have not been followed by a state commitment to job creation. Again, single mothers bear the brunt of the combined processes of globalization and the reductions of social programs. Finally, the chapter on Aotearoa/New Zealand points to the complexities of welfare state reform in a multiethnic society.

Although the authors limit their analyses to five cases, and to countries with well developed welfare states, similar processes are taking place throughout the world. In Latin America, for instance, where the welfare state was at least partially developed in a number of countries, reductions in social spending mandated either by the IMF's structural adjustment policies or by domestic initiatives have had similar effects both in terms of reducing welfare state programs and on their specific impact on women. The connections between globalization and increased poverty have been amply demonstrated by World Bank data and through the Bank's concern with poverty as the chief reason for the lack of development. Thus poverty is caused not only by the structural economic differences among countries, it is also a reason for the rapid increases in those differences. To the extent that women represent 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty this topic deserves a great deal of attention and analysis.

Are these processes reversible? Kingfisher argues that the dominant discourse of globalization and neo-liberalism coexists with alternative discourses that will eventually undermine the existing policies and the principles on which they are based. In the view of the authors, rays of hope here and there will ultimately lead to a transformation of the discourses and the policies. Based on the information presented in the book, it is not clear how this is going to happen. However, this does not diminish the importance of the book. The authors have certainly made a very valuable contribution to the literature of globalization, neo-liberalism, poverty and the feminization of poverty. Through their five well-researched case studies, they have effectively linked the

global with the local, and discourses with policies. Finally, the book shows that throughout the world the establishment of a market economy has been the result not of spontaneous forces, but of the very deliberate efforts of those with political power.

Silvia Borzutzky  
Carnegie Mellon University

Sonja Salamon, *Newcomers to Old Towns: Suburbanization of the Heartland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. \$35.00 hardcover.

In *Newcomers to Old Towns: Suburbanization of the Heartland*, anthropologist Sonya Salamon provides an examination of rural community change in six midwestern agrarian towns located in Illinois. The examination focuses on the meanings people attach to community and how commitment to place is shaped by these meanings. Embedded in this focus is Salamon's concern for examining the sense of community or the extent of "communityness" experienced by residents in the six agrarian towns. Salamon's concern for examining the "sense of community" and social change are central topics in the classical and contemporary literatures in urban sociology and community studies. However, the uniqueness of this text is the focus on the effects of population shifts from more urbanized areas to rural areas.

In order to examine the sense of community and rural community change, Salamon utilized a community ethnographic method supplemented by additional research methods, and she devised a typology to examine four community dimension indicators which consisted of (1) public space and place; (2) interconnections; (3) social resources; and (4) cross-age relations. This typology was used to examine perceptions and interactions between two central groups in the six agrarian towns, the oldtimers and the newcomers.

By testing the neighborhood hypothesis which concerned the process of the towns functioning as class-segregated neighborhoods in a small-city commuting zone, Salamon supports her thesis of the emerging post-agrarian community landscape by revealing the differentiation among the agrarian towns, the population specialization within the agrarian towns, and features of