

THE GENDER OF BUREAUCRACY: REFLECTIONS ON POLICY-MAKING FOR WOMEN¹

Joke Swiebel

POLICY for women is said to be multi-disciplinary; it needs therefore to be integrated into policy-making in all relevant fields. But what are the conditions necessary to attain this goal? Administrative theory is conspicuously silent about the power relationships between the sexes.

In this article I draw upon ten years' experience, working on the preparation of 'emancipation policies', in the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. I try to show what really happens inside bureaucracy when politics for women are being made (there is virtually no literature dealing with this specific question).

If, however, my findings do not accord easily with mainstream administrative theory, neither do they lend support to recent radical feminist anti-bureaucratic arguments. In the first part of this article, I shall briefly outline this feminist critique and seek to show why it, too, is unrealistic and liable to lead into a theoretical *cul-de-sac*.

The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy

Kathy Ferguson's book of this title, published in 1984, elaborates on the well-known radical feminist criticism of male bureaucratic society, which is said to be founded on rational values and formal organizational structures. By examining women's roles, both as bureaucrats and as clients, the author aims to 'shed considerable light on the nature of bureaucratic discrimination' (Ferguson, 1984, p 26). For both categories of victim, she prescribes the survival strategy of 'feminization'. In addition, she presents a 'feminist discourse', based on women's traditional experience, as a basis on which to build an alternative, non-bureaucratic way of life.

Unfortunately this analysis hardly explains *why* state bureaucracy is so difficult for women to enter and so resistant to policy changes in favour of women. The clarity of the argument is not helped by the frequent failure to distinguish properly between bureaucratic society at large, bureaucratized private companies and public or state bureaucracies.

There are similar problems with the writings of Dutch anarcho-feminists, some years back.² Often they made no distinction between the roles of civil servants and of politicians. Bureaucracy and parliamentary democracy were taken together and rejected alike in one negative argument, pretentiously called a feminist theory of the state.

The main flaw of this kind of argument is its 'essentialism'. By emphasizing that women's values, attitudes and behaviour are 'different' – though as a consequence of gender-related socialization and upbringing – it suggests that the difference is universal and almost natural, rather than needing to be explained in relation to its historical context.

A second flaw of this feminist criticism of bureaucracy as male culture is its utopianism. The suggestion is that in the future there will be androgynous people in an egalitarian society. Along the same lines, Leijenaar and Van Schaveren (1985) sought to explain persistent inter-ministerial struggles in the policy-making process as a manifestation of 'cock fighting', characteristic of a male-chauvinist cultural system. Women, by contrast, are depicted as more ready to compromise. Such a view tends to obscure the real conflicts of interest and belief that may be at stake (Outshoorn, 1983, p 47).

A third weakness is that this seems to be an argument against bureaucracy itself. It thus fails to identify what particular traits of bureaucracy form the true obstacles to change in favour of women.

Eisenstein (1985) is a noteworthy exception to this approach. She uses data on the implementation of affirmative action legislation from Australia to show how the 'embeddedness' of masculinity in public policy and bureaucracy can be challenged, and urges the need 'to deglobalize our concepts'. The rationality and 'objectivity' of bureaucracy in the Weberian sense are certainly connected to the capacity for rational argument and the use of logic

cultivated in male children. But the capacity for logic is not 'male' (Eisenstein, 1985, p 174). By saying the state is male, the possibility for change is excluded.

In conclusion, the radical feminist case against bureaucracy is a *cul-de-sac*. In order to explore the possibilities for change in public policies we need first to analyze existing policies and proposals for reform from a feminist perspective.³ Second, the structure and functioning of policy-making institutions should be studied for their potential contribution to policies for the advancement of women. It is in this spirit that I shall now consider state bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy and Women's Policies

Policy for women – or emancipation policy as it is called in the Netherlands – is of course primarily determined by political factors outside bureaucracy, such as the political régime, prevailing ideologies, demands of the women's movement, support by political and pressure groups or the political priorities of the cabinet. Here I concentrate on factors inside bureaucracy. Also, I am interested in the role of women, not only or not so much as participants in the general policy-making process but as explicit or implicit targets of state policies.

The most significant bureaucratic feature of emancipation policy is its definition as multi-disciplinary or intersectoral. The women's issue is seen as an aspect of policy problems in every conceivable field.

The administrative organization of Dutch emancipation policy reflects this view. The Department for the Co-ordination of Emancipation Policy (DCE), which is located in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, has only limited independent power. Its own budget is mainly spent on subsidies to activities and facilities that have come out of the women's movement. Its other tasks are consulting and negotiating about programmes and projects for which other departments carry the main responsibility.

In eight of the 13 Dutch ministries, intra-ministerial co-ordinating committees or advisory groups try to influence policy-making inside these ministries on issues related to women's position. Few civil servants – apart from those working at DCE – in these ministries have been specifically appointed for emancipation policy. Inter-ministerial co-ordination is organized both in a co-ordinating committee at the civil servants' level in which all ministries are represented, and in a special cabinet committee, of which eight ministers are regular members. There are in addition an independent advisory body for emancipation policy and two committees that advise on the implementation of the equal pay and anti-discrimination laws.

Co-ordination and integration are key terms. In the Emancipation Policy plan of the Dutch government, they are explained as follows:

The inter-disciplinary character of emancipation policy calls for co-ordination and integration. The co-ordinating task is to promote coherence in the preparation and implementation of the policies of various ministries directed at specific emancipatory goals. The integrating task is to promote the early recognition of emancipatory aspects of various general policies, in order to have them explicitly taken into account in the final decision-making (Beleidsplan Emancipatie, 1985, p 61 – my own translation).

There are three apparent reasons for defining emancipation policy as inter-disciplinary. First, the women's problem by its very nature cannot possibly be considered the exclusive domain of only one department. Women's social position is linked with organizational structures, laws and the supply of services in almost every sphere: employment, education, health and so on. Second, advocates of emancipation policy rightly feared it would otherwise be shunted off into some harmless corner of the bureaucratic landscape. Third, just when this policy was about to be formally launched, asking for more co-ordination in policy-making was fashionable, at least in the Netherlands. In a prestigious report to the government an advisory commission had just spelled out a model for national administrative organization in which co-ordinating structures played a prominent part (Bestuursorganisatie Bij de Kabinetsformatie, 1981).

If emancipation policy was to be inter-disciplinary, this implied that the tasks to be performed were not to be allocated to one specialized agency but should be part of the regular work of almost every department and ministry. They should take responsibility for integrating policies for the advancement of women into their own programmes and ensuring that their general policies were not at variance with general goals of the official emancipation policy. The job of the special emancipation agency would simply be to stimulate the process of co-ordination and integration.

That, at least was the theory. In practice, several factors prevented its realization. Indeed the notion of emancipation policy as an inter-disciplinary project might be called a myth. Some will see this myth as evidence of the male conspiracy inside bureaucracy to continue women's oppression. To me it makes more sense to recognize the commitments this myth contains and find ways of making political use of them.

Obstacles to Integration

Four factors explain, in my view, why co-ordinated multi-disciplinary policy making for women does not work in reality. First is the *politics of problem definition*.

Policy makers do not readily see the position of women as integral to the social problems they have to solve. They tend not to recognize that what is good for people, might sometimes only be good for men. Politicians and administrators can be found willing to agree that something special should be done for women apart from their general programmes, if there is someone present to tell them what it is that should be done. But the idea that their regular programmes and policies might be helping to keep women in their place does not occur to them. Examples are a concept of family policy that does not take into account that different household members may have different wishes and interests or a healthcare policy dominated by a medical model that pays no attention to the fact that women's complaints are often connected to their subordinate status.

It is hardly to be expected that policy makers in any field will spontaneously integrate women's demands into their policies. In the short run they have nothing to gain by doing so. Policy integration in the real sense presupposes that policy makers will be prepared to change their definitions of reality, their concepts and their notion of policy-impacts. This is an agonizing reappraisal which is unlikely to happen so long as real interests underpin the 'old' vision.

The second factor is *insufficient political support*. The women's issue is still insufficiently politicized. By this I mean that demands are vague, support for the cause is diffuse rather than specific and the issue is not incorporated into the overriding political dimension of left versus right. The women's issue is still a 'valence' issue (Stokes, cited in Outshoorn, 1986, p 23), that is a goal that attracts general support so long as there is not too much conflict over the means to reach that goal. Specific programmes and budgets for women which cost little and embarrass nobody will not evoke conflict.

The strategy of policy integration will bring women's demands into more prominent and conflictual political arenas – parliamentary debate and/or collective bargaining. What happens to women's demands in the earlier stages of policy formation inside bureaucracy will then depend on the political calculation of the policy makers concerned. Enough specific support for closely argued demands is what counts at this stage. Otherwise no co-ordinating device can help.

Fragmentation of administrative organization is the third factor to be considered. The cabinet member who is responsible for women's policy has – except for power over the specific policies carried on by his or her own ministry – no direct say in the policies of others. The doctrine of individual ministerial responsibility leaves them only a co-ordinating role, which often gets overruled by the power of other cabinet members in their own domain. Seldom will collective decision-making in cabinet be invoked as a corrective device.

This has serious consequences for the treatment of women's policy within bureaucracy. The low status of the political function of co-ordinating women's policy is transmitted to the

bureaucrats who perform it. The co-ordinating bureau or division will always have difficulties in getting the right information in time and in being admitted to discussions on policy problems at a stage early enough to be able to influence the outcomes. The other ministries or departments will always try to keep their right of initiative. Once the train has started it is difficult to stop or change its direction.

Finally, elements of administrative or bureaucratic *culture* are an obstacle to a real integration of women's policy. In as much as making policy for women is not recognized as a professional activity in its own right, this task is often allocated to bureaucrats lacking the relevant knowledge and experience, if it is explicitly allocated to someone at all. In most cases civil servants are supposed 'to reckon with women's interests', on top of their normal jobs, though no incentive is given them to do so. Apart from the relatively small and low status central co-ordinating unit, no careers in emancipation policy can be made. Being a feminist is no asset. Consequently, the bureaucratic advocates of emancipation are left with the difficult choice between opposition and accommodation, knowing neither can be effective. Taking sides on a social question is not seemly for civil servants, although in the course of bureaucratic warfare it frequently occurs in the guise of defending the interests of ministers or the territories of their departments. But the bureaucrats responsible for women have no stronghold of their own to defend and lack the weapons to impress their adversaries.

Counter-Strategies

What strategies can be employed to counteract these obstacles? First use can be made of the myth of integration, to add authority to policies for women. Examples are getting future policies on some important women's issues incorporated into the government's programme,⁴ having a general document on government policy for women passed by the cabinet and sent to parliament or setting up a cabinet committee to decide on issues of women's policy. This kind of action lends political authority to the promise that women's interests will be taken into account. Moreover politicians and civil servants are forced to look into the issue and a learning process may ensue. The risk of this counter-strategy is clear: if no real measures are taken it will only reinforce the symbolic character of women's policy. On the other hand, the positive side of symbolic outputs should not be overlooked.

Symbolic victories that give 'official' sanction to a group's cause lend legitimacy to both the group and the interest it represents. Without this legitimacy, the group may have little hope of commanding a share of the material benefits of policies (Elder and Cobb, 1983, p 115).

To promote more appropriate insights among politicians and administrators into what women's problems really are and how government can deal with them, two complementary strategies are needed. First traditional theories have to be debunked and new 'paradigms' introduced and argued. But these ideological points should then be translated into concepts, facts and figures that are fit for immediate use by policy makers. These two rather different kinds of activity – devising new models of thought and employing standard bureaucratic skills – may demand different kinds of people to perform them but both are equally important.

A third way in which every bureaucrat working for women's emancipation should seek to offset obstacles to integration is by actively generating political support for specific women's demands. Women's groups and even politicians often do not know when and what kind of arguments to put forward if their demands are to have the most chance of being heard. Bureaucrats can guide them. Mostly they do this through standard bureaucratic means such as information, advice or providing a subsidy, but sometimes a degree of secrecy is advisable. Still there is nothing illegal in this sort of activity. 'Networking', far from simply the latest fad in the women's movement, is part of the daily routine in almost every other field of policy-making.⁵

In the fourth place, the fragmentation of bureaucracy and consequent powerlessness of a co-ordinating official can be countered by bureaucrats redefining their roles. This implies taking the initiative oneself instead of trying to influence the policies proposed by other agencies. This

strategy will only succeed in relatively new fields or when an old problem can be given new prominence by changing its formulation. The most striking examples of such redefinition occur in the area of sexual violence against women. Problems like rape, prostitution or pornography used to be seen as issues of public morality but have now been more or less recast as equality or emancipation issues.

This strategy of changing roles has one important limitation: it will not work if it implies transferring large sums of money from one department to another. In the field of women's work many experimental projects can be launched using this means but it still does not get round the problem of policy integration.

At this point it must be re-emphasized that policy integration is a myth. It simply is not true that the cabinet or even the Prime Minister is really interested in the harmony of all government action and therefore will see to it that women's interests are duly taken into account. Women's issues must be broken down into negotiable demands; co-ordination and integration really mean negotiating and conflict regulation (Tjeenk Willink, 1984; 1987).

Lastly, bureaucrats in charge of women's affairs can refuse to be 'feminized' (Ferguson, 1984, ch 3). To do this they need to foster their own professionalism and to establish their own strongholds. They should give serious attention to budgets, personnel policies and internal organization, not in imitation of male competitive ways but in order to strengthen their negotiating power. Above all, these bureaucrats should extend and exploit their unique selling point, their insights into the women's issue, their skill in immediately detecting the consequences for women in any policy proposal and their knowledge of the government's legal commitments that are often overlooked. Of course this is exactly why they are often regarded with suspicion by their male colleagues. Their strategy should however be to make themselves indispensable, by filling the gap they have shown to exist.

The counter-strategies I have listed, can only succeed, it must be stressed, with outside support from the women's movement and from the women's lobby in political parties and interest groups.

Gender and Administrative Theory

The arguments presented above both about obstacles to policy integration and about counter-strategies are at total variance with the constitutional doctrine that assumes concertation of all government activities. As Self (1977, p 88) notes, belief in this doctrine is

... rooted (especially for administrators themselves) in historical acceptance of the unity of the Crown and the desirable harmonization of all public action, supported in modern times by the political capital to be gained through exposures of administrative conflict or waste.

There is a strange contradiction between belief in the public interest, legitimizing the roles and functions of civil servants on the one hand and the reality of the endless power struggles within and between administrative institutions on the other.⁶ Perhaps the contradiction can be explained by the interest the winning party in a conflict has in pretending there was no conflict at all (Lukes, 1974).

At any rate most administrative theory provides little help in explaining conflict within bureaucracy, let alone conflicts about gender. Such explanation as is offered is cast in terms either of different personality types or of the supposed universal and rational pursuit of personal interests (in salaries, power, agency, budgets and so forth).

It seems that this kind of administrative theory has little to contribute to a better understanding of the problem of gender and bureaucracy. Instead we need to concentrate on the politics of problem definition and on the role that bureaucracy itself plays in agenda building. If administrative theory is to incorporate the gender factor, it must draw upon political theory, particularly the pluralist-elitist debate in democratic theory and theories of agenda building. From a feminist perspective, the first step is to expose the fiction of a single 'public interest' and the reality of the male bias that dominates the theory and practice of bureaucratic co-ordination and policy integration.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank a number of her colleagues, members of the European Committee for Equality between Women and Men within the Council of Europe, for their valuable comments, in particular C Antonopoulou (Greece), D Gaudart (Austria), C Kaufmann (Switzerland) and M R Tavares da Silva (Portugal).
2. See *inter alia* publications of the feminist publishing collective, De Bonte Was, and Stasse *et al.*, 1982.
3. Two readers that present useful overviews are Bonaparte (1982) and Lewis (1983).
4. This is even possible at the international level. For instance the Third Medium Term Plan 1987–1991 of the Council of Europe contains many references to women's issues. Given this organization's pro-family orientation, this is almost a miracle: a miracle, however, brought about by the deliberate actions of a handful of women.
5. See Meehan (1985, pp 137–38, 170) on the role of 'politicized bureaucrats' in the US and at EEC headquarters in Brussels. Hoskyns (1985) is also relevant.
6. Self (1977, pp 174–82). For illustrations of this phenomenon, see Lynn and Jay (1986); Ponting (1986).

REFERENCES

- Beleidsplan Emancipatie* (1985), Tweede Kamer, 19052, 1–2.
- Bestuursorganisatie Bij de Kabinetsformatie* (1971), (Den Haag: Staatsuitgeverij).
- Bonaparte, E (ed) (1982), *Women, Power and Policy* (New York: Pergamon Press).
- Eisenstein, H (1985), 'The Gender of Bureaucracy: Reflections on Feminism and the State' in J Goodnow and C Pateman (eds), *Women, Social Science and Public Policy* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin).
- Elder, C and Cobb, R W (1983), *The Political Use of Symbols* (New York).
- Ferguson, K E (1984), *The Feminist Case against Bureaucracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- Hoskyns, C (1985), "Women's Equality and the European Community", *Feminist Review*, 20, pp 71–88.
- Leijenaar, M and Van Schaveren, P (1985), 'Verandering van een Mannecultuur?' in *Ambtelijke Cultuur en Verandering van het Openbaar Bestuur*, Geschriften van der Vereniging voor Bestuurskunde ('s,Gravenhage: Vuga), 9, pp 159–179.
- Lewis, J (ed) (1983), *Women's Welfare and Women's Rights* (London/Canberra: Croom Helm).
- Lynn, J and Jay A (1986), *The Complete Yes Minister and Yes, Prime Minister* (London: Guild Publishers).
- Lukes, S (1974), *Power; a Radical View* (London: Macmillan).
- Meehan, E M (1985), *Women's Rights at Work: Campaigns and Policy in Britain and the United States* (London: Macmillan).
- Outshoorn, J (1983), 'Meer Vrouwen in de Politiek?' in *Vrouwen in Politieke Functies; Verslag van een Studiedag* ('s,Gravenhage: Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken), pp 37–49.
- Outshoorn, J (1986), *De Politieke Strijd Rondom de Abortuswetgeving in Nederland 1964–1984*, dissertation, Amsterdam.
- Ponting, C (1986), *Whitehall, Tragedy and Farce* (London: Sphere Books).
- Self, P (1977), *Administrative Theories and Politics* (second edition) (London: Allen & Unwin).
- Stasse, H *et al* (1982), *Staat en Selsestrijd; Naar een Feministische Staatstheorie* (Amsterdam: SUA).
- Tjeenk Willink, H D (1984), *De Mythe van het Samenhangend Overheidsbeleid* (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink).
- Tjeenk Willink, H D (1987), *De Organisatie van het Emancipatiebeleid*, speech delivered at a conference on emancipation policy, The Hague, 23 April.