

## **Family Shifts: Families, Policies, and Gender Equality**

Margrit Eichler  
Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997

### **Reviewed by Elizabeth Reid Boyd**

Families have experienced “tectonic shifts” in the last decades of the twentieth century. Such major shifts include gender equality and the rise of biotechnology. In *Family Shifts: Families, Policies and Gender Equality*, Margrit Eichler argues that concepts and language lag behind these changes, with serious social policy consequences.

Eichler points out that family policies (which include a gamut of social welfare policies, taxation regulations and family laws) are at least partially shaped by what policy makers think the family should be. This resonates with Carol Bacchi’s (1999)<sup>1</sup> assertion that it is useful to think about politics as discursive battles over meaning. Bacchi suggests that the state is always intervening and involved in the shaping of definitions, rather than simply responding to changes and problems.

Eichler uses three models to demonstrate the significance of the conceptual and ideological underpinning of family policy. The patriarchal model of the family, based upon gender differentiation and inequality, was particularly prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century (although its legacy certainly remains apparent in current Australian social policy). The individual responsibility model represents an ideological shift from gender differentiation to a commitment to equal treatment of individuals, regardless of gender.

Eichler shows that both these models are flawed. However the individual responsibility model moves away from enshrined legal and social gender inequality towards formal equality, which has had the potential to disguise and reinforce actual inequality. Further, she demonstrates that in both models the public or community has no responsibility for the economic well-being of the family. In the patriarchal model, responsibility is held by the father, in the individual responsibility model, by a parent.

An alternative to these models is what Eichler calls the social responsibility model. This is based upon principles including minimised stratification upon the basis of sex, that “functioning relationships” constitute a family unit, and that the public share responsibility with both parents for the care of dependent children. This last component directly challenges premises and policies that reflect the individual responsibility model. Public responsibility depends upon an acknowledgement of the social value of caring for dependents.

That functioning relationships constitute a family unit is perhaps one of

the most provocative ideas in Eichler's model since, as she points out, the heterosexual union of marriage is a legally privileged relationship. In Australia, at a time when it is being proposed by the Federal government that health rebates for IVF be limited to married women, and exclude single and lesbian women, it is clear that this principle can represent a huge ideological stumbling block. Eichler's social responsibility model represents a promising vision, but it is also worth remembering that family shifts can oscillate. Social responsibility is not a guaranteed progression, but a goal that will require vigilance and effort.

<sup>1</sup>Bacchi, C. 1999. *Women, Policy and Politics: The Construction of Policy Problems*. London: Sage.

## **A Jewish Mother in Shangri-la**

Rosie Rosenzweig  
Boston: Shambhala, 1998

### **Reviewed by Marion Stichman Gold**

Rosie Rosenzweig accepts her son Ben's invitation to learn about Buddhism first-hand rather than asking him to return home – to her and to the faith of his birth, Judaism. However, after reading Rosenzweig's adventures in Shangri-la, I was reminded of a mother's familiar admonition to a child, "and if your friends were to jump off a bridge, would you follow?" Rosenzweig, in her quest to understand her son's choice to become a practicing Buddhist, visits retreats in Europe and Asia where she speaks to clerics and laity in her search for answers. Her attempts to recreate her son's experiences reveal that she is able to find common ground between Buddhism and Judaism. However, Rosenzweig's description of these experiences reveal more about her own association with Judaism than answer any questions we may have about her son's change of religion. Why Ben becomes a Buddhist is not definitively answered.

Rosenzweig's narrative of her journey to Paris and Nepal in search of Ben's truth, as well as her own, leads her to analyses of past events that link mother and son. Her reflections on past experiences are sometimes painful and the seeming alienation between mother and son, husband and wife which emerge from time to time serve as a template for the patterns of living together for so many of us. Nevertheless, the reason for undertaking the search for Ben's religious identity through a concrete reenactment of his spiritual journey remains a mystery.

Was it necessary for Rosenzweig to travel half way around the world in an