

4

Mothers' Allowances and the Regulation of the Family Economy

If the amount allow[ed] is insufficient, the mother does not stay at home. She works as before, and the children are on the street, and have no better home than before the Act came into force ... the discontinuance of the present policy would undermine the whole principle upon which the legislation is based.

A.P. Paget, Director, Manitoba Mothers' Allowances Commission

If the individual members within a family in need of social aid have a right to look to the whole community for provision of that social aid, then surely there must be an obligation upon those who are insisted in turn to take their part in improving the condition of those dependent upon them ... If the right of the individual to live his or her own life, regardless of obligations upon them, is to be carried out, then it has to operate all along the line, and that individual has no right, in my judgement, to ask the community to sacrifice for him when he is not willing to sacrifice any measure himself.

Charlotte Whitton to Ernest Blois, 27 February 1936

Feminists, clergymen, and social reformers had promoted mothers' allowances as a special, non-stigmatizing form of public assistance, one that exempted women from the old, poor law strictures; even so, government administrators began in the early 1920s to undermine the child protection tenets of this legislation, the purpose of which had been to preserve family life by keeping the significant mother-figure in the home. Thus, an alternative approach to solving the problem of the

Select Language and Voice : 

132 Engendering the State

'pauperizing tendency'¹ began to emerge, when administrators of the various provincial acts began to enforce regulations designed to encourage 'the spirit of self-help.'² Mothers were now being compelled to enter the workforce as female substitutes for the male breadwinner; government assistance was now perceived as merely supplemental to the family wage and as not destructive of the male breadwinner's responsibility both to his family and to the State. As Charlotte Whitton observed, the primary intent behind state welfare had to be to preserve the equation between community obligations and individual rights. Accompanying this retooling of mothers' allowances into a form of workfare, older children were now exhorted to contribute their wages to the family economy, the intent being to preserve the ideal of the family as an economically (rather than mainly spiritually) interdependent unit. Administrators abhorred moral lapses among their female beneficiaries; even so, it was the penalties for violating the breadwinner norm by *failing to work and to instil the work ethic in their children* that were enforced most rigorously; it was these transgressions, and not immoral sexual behaviour, that were most likely to result in disqualification. More importantly, the issue of work was now the central locus of class conflict as well as the primary source of tension between middle-class welfare officials and working-class beneficiaries, who had interpreted mothers' allowances to mean that the State would entirely replace the lost breadwinner by offering dependent women a substantive 'family' wage. By the 1920s, as postwar fears regarding population questions and the problem of juvenile delinquency receded, the child welfare network of feminists and clergymen lost ground to the advocates of national economic efficiency and to the defenders of an older ideal of the work ethic, upon which the limited state so depended for its longevity.

From Mothers' Pensions to Mothers' Allowances

In 1917, when state aid to mothers was first mooted in Ontario, the perception was that such government legislation was more akin to pensions for soldiers' service than an extension of private charity. Because in wartime child and family welfare was seen as 'not charity but patriotism,'³ this early movement for mothers' pensions was debated in the language of rights-based entitlements and in terms of social insurance policy. It was thus severed from its earlier attachment to the work of the children's aid societies, which were preoccupied with juvenile

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 133

delinquency.⁴ At this time, only a minority of social reformers were critical of the two-tier system of military versus civilian family relief. These groups criticized the existing system of assistance to mothers and their children because it framed such benefits as a supplement to soldiers' pensions and referred to them as 'Widows' Pensions,' and offered women state protection only in terms of their status as wives of citizen soldiers.⁵ Because in 1917 mothers' pensions were perceived as part of the war effort – and especially as a method for garnering voluntary enlistments – it was considered vital to dissociate them from charity and from the taint of pauperization. Writing before the introduction of conscription, W.A. Riddell, the Ontario superintendent of Trades and Labour, observed in an official memorandum to Premier Hearst that 'no one will but admit that a deserving mother in a home suddenly deprived of the breadwinner ought to be placed in a position where she can continue to care for her children and her home without being subjected to the stigma that always attaches to charitable relief.'⁶

Between 1919 and 1920, before public opinion turned decidedly against the relief of returned soldiers, mothers' pensions were viewed as a precursor to a broader program of social insurance that would eventually include male unemployment and sickness insurance. Riddell, in his 1917 outline and impending legislation for mothers, buttressed his arguments by quoting from esteemed New Liberal and Progressive thinkers such as L.T. Hobhouse and John Dewey. In this vein, he stated that a scheme of mothers' pensions was more important than old age and other forms of social insurance. By concentrating on the interests of the child, and seeing the mother as 'of secondary importance,' Riddell was able to articulate a generous, rights-based scheme which marked a decisive and radical break with the philosophy of needs-based private charity and public municipal relief the intent of which was to include all categories of single motherhood: widows and deserted and unmarried mothers. Riddell used Colorado's Mothers' Compensation Law, which resembled workman's compensation, as the model for his 1917 proposal for an Ontario Mothers' Pensions Act:

It is a recognition by the state that aid is rendered not as a charity but as a right – as justice due mothers whose work in rearing their children is a work for the state as that of the soldier who is paid by the state for his services on the battle-field; it is a recognition for the first time by society that the state is responsible in a measure for the plight of the mother and

134 Engendering the State

acknowledges its responsibility by sharing the burden of her poverty that is created largely by the conditions that the State permits to exist.⁷

At war's end, many of the more liberal aspects of this legislation were still before the public, largely because feminist organizations were at the height of their influence in 1918. In 1914 the Local Council of Women of Toronto, under the guidance of Mrs Heustis, had established a privately funded experiment in mothers' aid that saw as its principal aim the relieving of all womanhood from the burden of poverty.⁸ Their intimate acquaintance with the social distress of impoverished motherhood informed their demands to Premier Drury in 1920: 'We would have you give some consideration, also, to the deserted wife and the unmarried wife, remembering that the child is the primary object.'⁹ Between 1918 and 1920, women's periodicals were filled with solicitations on behalf of deserted and unmarried mothers; these publications became the chief locus of agitation to make the machinery for administering mothers' allowances as flexible and discretionary as possible.¹⁰ It was only by 1929 that CAS activists, together with mental hygiene experts, began to conceive of unmarried motherhood as a social rather than a moral question¹¹; a decade before that, social feminists had been championing the rights of these 'defective' women, and had been instrumental in transforming what had been viewed as a problem of private rights between a woman and the responsible father (which belonged in the courts) into a matter of public responsibility.

Middle-class women urged that the state become, in the words of magistrate Emily Murphy, 'the ultimate parent of all children, but ... always be the parent of the illegitimate.'¹² Feminists agitated for a system of mothers' allowances, because this system of protection against the lack of 'sex-control' was preferable to the alternative – the legitimizing of illegitimate children, which would mean that properly married women would have to endure a system of legalized 'polygamy.'¹³ Others, like the Rev. J.R. Mutchmor of Winnipeg, campaigned to have mothers' allowances extended to unwed mothers, largely as an attempt to limit the influence of the CAS on government policy-making¹⁴; meanwhile, female superintendents of orphans' homes were urging governments to include unmarried and deserted women as beneficiaries so that the large burden of children in their institutions, occasioned by the war, might be relieved.¹⁵ Despite the weight of public opinion in favour of state rights for unmarried and deserted mothers, many government officials continued to inveigh against the

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 135

blurring of the lines between public and individual responsibility that such entitlements would encourage; they remained wedded to the notion that such familial abnormalities were moral rather than social in their derivation. Thus the often expansive vision of a system of 'childrens' allowances' (such as that proposed by the Toronto Committee on Mothers' Allowances, led by the Rev. Peter Bryce¹⁶) became, when translated into formal government statutes, restrictive and punitive. A case of 'real hardship' involving a deserving woman with five children between 2 and 11, deserted two years previously by her husband, was laid before Premier Ferguson. His bureaucratic response was that 'I do not think it would be wise to open the door any wider in regard to desertion.'¹⁷ The case of Mrs Wilson from Sarnia, Ontario, a mother who had lost her marriage certificate, was even more revealing of the official mentality. A local businessman pleaded that 'surely the letter of the Law should yield to common humanity, and a technical point not rob this widow of the help the Mothers allowance would be in being able to take care of her family and give them the care they should have, as is, I believe the end to which the law was made.' Yet so inviolable was the marriage contract perceived to be that the Rev. Peter Bryce, now an administrator of the act, retorted: 'To grant allowances where there is no evidence of marriage would be to establish an undesirable precedent.' More tellingly still as testimony of the deeper goals underlying state funding for mothers, Bryce concluded that surely among her seven children there were potential wage earners who could privately support the Wilson household.¹⁸

By 1919 the wartime movement for mothers' pensions had been reworked into a government scheme for mothers' allowances, which were strictly limited to widows and women with incapacitated husbands.¹⁹ Despite the urgings of the Rev. Peter Bryce and the Minister of Labour, Walter Rollo, that the benefits be made generous enough to allow a widow to stay at home full time to raise her children,²⁰ the principles enshrined in the Mothers' Allowances Act owed much more to the perspective of Mrs Adam Shortt, who had a preponderant influence on the final articles of the legislation. Shortt represented the continuation of older, poor-relief assumption that poverty was a moral condition and that only 'respectable' widows were entitled to assistance. She adamantly opposed the 'sentimentalists' who pictured children 'being daily torn from kindly women's arms to be placed in cruel institutions.' She even adhered to a conception of child-saving that predated even the campaigns of J.J. Kelso in the 1890s on behalf of foster

136 Engendering the State

homes. At the same time, like the supporters of the CASs, Shortt believed that children should be wrenched from the care of mothers for reasons of illness, improper guardianship, and mental deficiency – a perspective that became firmly embedded in government legislation and that confirmed the need, of which Shortt was a great exponent, for close supervision and rehabilitation of beneficiaries.²¹ By focusing on the moral attributes of motherhood, Shortt was directly refuting the more progressive social calculus of poverty offered by less conservative feminists and social reformers; she held to the belief that all unmarried women should be defined as ‘feeble-minded’ and that deserted women should seek redress only through the private means of the courts.²² At a time when most social analysis was beginning to emphasize the social and economic environment, Shortt continued to stress the moral dimensions of social distress. Unlike other women, who placed a greater priority on the direct physical and economic contributions that the family and motherhood made in service to the nation, she maintained that mothers’ allowances should make children healthy in ‘mind, body, and *morals*,’²³ and downplayed the ideology of social citizenship and national efficiency.

Despite her preoccupation with delinquency, which she maintained was caused by women working all day outside the home,²⁴ Shortt was less sanguine than either Rollo or Bryce about the need to pay a substantial grant to female beneficiaries of the State. Indeed, it was Shortt’s domineering presence and her close ties with the Conservative Party²⁵ that enabled her to redirect the mothers’ allowance movement so that it no longer focused on protecting the home and the family wage – explicit goals of both feminists and organized labour. Shortt rejected the gendered notions of work and pauperization insisted on by these two groups. In her view, allowances should be as niggardly as possible in order that the mother not be entirely relieved of the need to work – preferably as a domestic. She saw work as ennobling for both sexes and likewise viewed pauperization through idleness as a moral excrescence of women as well as men: ‘Physical, mental and moral strength are only acquired by doing and struggling not by sitting down and being paid for it.’²⁶ She argued that if men could replace women in the home, women could likewise become wage earners – a vision of gender equality and economic independence for women²⁷ that many lauded as a radical feminist perspective. This resulted in thousands of women being denied adequate benefits and thus being forced to seek work outside the home. Shortt insisted that women work for their

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 137

relief (the old poor-law philosophy applied through outdoor relief rather than the House of Industry), in large part because she believed that motherhood alone did not constitute a set of social entitlements for women. In her view, paid labour formed the primary claim for state benefits. Although Shortt adhered to a less gendered view of work, which tended to break down the ideology of separate spheres, it was a perspective that affronted the sensibilities of both middle- and working-class women, who maintained that women should not be compelled to work when their central function pertained to the raising of children and the care of the home. Ostensibly, Shortt's feminism advocated equality between the sexes; in practice, it coerced women to work against their will, and did not benefit women who wanted the rights of mothers to be enshrined in government welfare policies, whereby the State would wholly replace the breadwinner role of their dead or incapacitated husbands.

Unlike other reformers, Shortt sought more direct means than mothers' allowances for maintaining a future skilled workforce earning high wages: she advocated more work for men, better vocational training for children, and a system of social insurance whereby social benefits would be based solely on the activity of work. Clearly, she saw service to the state through motherhood as subordinate to male citizenship. Shortt's reconceptualizing of rights-based mothers' pensions into a needs-based system of mothers' allowances – which reflected the views of the other provincial commissioners – and the consequent whittling away of women's citizenship entitlements, must be understood in terms of her preference for German and British models of social insurance, which placed a clear priority on the citizenship rights of male workers. 'If a good workman breaks down and dies,' asked Shortt, 'having by his labour contributed to the country's development; why should his family be neglected by the country?'²⁸ In the end, Shortt believed that women's access to the State should be dependent on their status as wives – that is why she limited benefits to widows – and saw the program of mothers' allowances not as the precursor to an expanding welfare system, but rather as a continuation of traditional public charity, and thus separate from and inferior to a self-help system of unemployment and sickness insurance based on male wages and contributions.

In relabelling their approach 'mothers' allowances' (instead of 'mothers' pensions), policymakers were converting the idea of service into a notion of women's obligations to the State. This severely eroded

138 Engendering the State

the integrity of the notion of social citizenship advanced by Canadian feminists. In this new equation between motherhood and the State, women performed 'a piece of work in co-operation with the State' as employees of government, and the focus was no longer on the independent contribution of the citizen but rather on the State. This formulation, with its 'insistence upon the mother's responsibility to the State in the bringing up of its citizens,'²⁹ became the State's rationale for intervening in working-class family life by investigating and rehabilitating families. In an effort to assuage conservative middle-class elements in the community who might try to block this new legislation by complaining about the misuse of their taxes, the formulators of the Mothers' Allowances Act stressed that the new policy was widely accepted. 'It was distinctly evident to those of us present throughout,' stated W.A. Riddell, 'that this idea of the State employing the mother of its future citizens to rear her children according to approved standards and subsidizing the home for this purpose, where need exists, has taken hold of a very large element in the community and is being given expression in no uncertain voice.'³⁰

When policymakers pointed out that mothers' allowances were divorced from any taint of charity, they did not mean they were not based on need, or that they fell beyond the scope of investigation. Rather, such allowances were defined as non-stigmatizing because women received them through the mail, and were not (as was the case with municipal relief) forced to publicly display their need and destitution. This constituted an important strategy in reclaiming 'family pride' and ensuring that personal responsibility would continue to be part of the ideal of family self-sufficiency.³¹ Most importantly, mothers' allowances were perceived to be a radical break from the practice of charity where material aid was granted as a philanthropic offering or gift that demanded nothing of the recipient. In contrast, mothers' allowances were deemed not to be charity because in exchange for assistance, women were obligated to perform the service of raising their children. From this perspective, investigation was not a relic of old-style charity; rather, it was part of a new vision of the State – one based on a reciprocal system of duties and obligations. Although repugnant to modern sensibilities, the belief that the goal of all publicly funded social programs was to educate recipients for social responsibility, and that it was proper for the State to demand respectable conduct in return, was embedded in a wide variety of early-twentieth-century political perspectives. The ideal of the community

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 139

as built upon a network of obligations was the ideological firmament that joined Fabian socialists like Beatrice Webb, social democrats like W.A. Riddell, and conservatives like Mrs Shortt.³² All the major architects of the modern welfare state, including British advocates of social insurance such as William Beveridge and Sidney Webb,³³ and their Canadian counterparts such as Harry Cassidy, remained committed to various degrees of state compulsion and were not averse to recommending policies that would compel male wage earners to work in exchange for benefits. Thus the invasive nature of state welfare was not a function of gender. Moreover, if the numerous snitching letters from neighbours demanding equal access to state aid are any indication, the notion of an intrusive government that enforced sexual propriety, budgetary responsibility, and personal accountability in return for state aid was an ideal that transcended class boundaries. Woman invited the State to assume responsibility for their children so that they might have 'proper training'; while women who transgressed sexual norms often found themselves being regulated by the State when complained about by working-class neighbours (and in one case after the protests of an angry husband).³⁴

However much working-class families were willing to participate in the community scrutiny that determined which mothers were deserving of state benefits, such investigation remained decidedly intrusive. Also, the visitors employed by various provincial mothers' allowance commissions had cultural expectations that often ran counter to the needs and realities of working-class widows. The vast majority of social investigators were Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, and female, and their cultural biases showed in their attempts to examine and reform impoverished women and their families. As the case files of European immigrant women investigated by the Manitoba Mothers' Allowance Commission make clear, however, nationality was never made a criterion for eligibility. Mrs G., a Jewish immigrant from Romania, the widow of a tinsmith with the CPR, was assigned a Jewish female visitor to interpret her needs. Although the records regarding her case often labelled her as 'hysterical' because she spoke loudly and demanded her rights in a foreign tongue, the basis of her conflict with the Manitoba government revolved not around her cultural traits, but over the issue of whether her children would attend high school rather than work. Mrs G., an educated woman, was adamant that her children be upwardly mobile and economically independent.³⁵

It is not entirely surprising that female investigators would perceive

140 Engendering the State

women whose husbands were skilled and responsible wage earners as more deserving of state assistance and characterize them as, for example, 'a refined woman and good homemaker.' One beneficiary was described by a female visitor as an 'exceptionally fine woman and very well educated' and was quickly granted an allowance because her husband had been a bank manager.³⁶ Moreover, criminality among the children of applicants, refusal to send children to school, and the obvious traducing of marriage bonds were not countenanced by the commission. For example, the Brant County Board rejected Mrs Matilda Main's application on the grounds that having lived with and borne the illegitimate child of a Mr Linnington, 'the moral conditions surrounding the home are not conducive to the proper training of the children'; and Mrs Georgina Larochelle's allowance was not reinstated because the criminal records of her two older children cancelled out the good behaviour of two younger children who were cared for in a convent in Ottawa and one other who lived with an aunt in Espanola, whose conduct was beyond reproach.³⁷ The starkest example at hand of the disdain and opprobrium that middle-class women felt toward those not of their class or ethnic background was a visitor's report on the widow of a truck driver, whose daily job as a charwoman prevented her from caring for her own housekeeping:

Beneficiary is sub-normal and cannot see the advantage of education and I have called on Rev. Mr. Miller who is going to see her and have a serious talk with her about E. and even G. six years should be at school. Severe measures will have to be taken to make her keep these two boys at school ... Place was fearfully untidy when I called and Beneficiary said she was away working. I told her there was no excuse and made her sweep while I was there and in fifteen minutes, she had it looking different. She and he are slack and will always be. Place is an old shack and old floor and dirty wall paper. Woman's clothes are fairly tidy children raggy and think they seldom see a bath. Has promised to do better and Rev. Mr Miller is going to do his best to make her improve if it is at all possible.³⁸

While such disquisitions were often entered into the case files of these clients of the State, problems of cleanliness were rarely the sole basis for disqualifying widows from state assistance. More often than not, such tirades over a woman's ability to clean her house and properly bathe her children belied deeper frustrations. In the above case, the investigator's raging against the mother's uncleanliness was in large

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 141

part a mere venting of the spleen, a result of years of frustration during which the beneficiary had seemingly ignored her cardinal duty, which was to inculcate proper work habits in her children and advise them on the necessity to contribute their wages to the family economy.³⁹

There were, of course, extreme cases, such as that of Mrs A from Winnipeg. Although unable to prove that she was married, after the death of her husband from double-pneumonia 'aggravated by attempted suicide,' she was nevertheless granted an allowance from the Manitoba Mothers' Allowances Commission; however, this was temporarily rescinded a few years later when she gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, having become entangled with the delivery man from the Wet Wash Laundry service. However, despite such moral irregularity, after agreeing to no longer consort with Mr J., this young widow was once again placed on full government benefits. However, child welfare workers once again revoked her allowance after Mrs A. demonstrated extreme negligence by regularly leaving her children unattended at home when she visited her neighbour to while away her evenings listening to the gramophone. On one of these nights, unfortunately, her house accidentally burned down, resulting in the death of her baby twins. The State subsequently intervened and removed her older children from her care. The injured widow protested vehemently against this invasion of her privacy, writing in 1925 to A.P. Paget, the director of the Manitoba Mothers' Allowances Commission, that 'you carnt see what you have done but you have torn a womens children from her & thrown her on the streets it perhaps does not seam like that to you.' As she accused government authorities, 'you let [another woman] keep my children would you like someone to take yours from you I tried to get work the first four Months but you never intended to help me.' While this woman was accused of gross child neglect, immorality and mental incompetence, she nevertheless was reinstated again on government support because she was 'fond of the children and anxious to have them with her.' She was only definitively removed from the allowance rolls in 1929 – not for having male visitors but because she and her family were deemed 'self-supporting' when her daughters began to work.⁴⁰

The emphasis that historians have placed on this discourse as evidence of moral regulation or social control of the working classes by a 'middle-class' state⁴¹ suggests the existence of a large, bureaucratic government. While a value-laden discourse among investigators and policymakers did exist, it is not at all clear how carefully its prescriptions were implemented. Even the experienced Ernest Blois – the only

142 Engendering the State

investigator for all of mothers' allowances and old age pensions in Nova Scotia – admitted that the process of investigating often reluctant applicants was a precarious and often unsuccessful exercise: 'To go as stranger into the various communities visited, and secure in a short time, full and accurate information regarding prospective applicants in respect to such matters as character, competency, education, occupation, relations, family traditions, ambitions, ideals, possessions, etc., was in the very nature of the case, a somewhat delicate piece of work, and one requiring great tact, patience, and perseverance.'⁴² The State's ability to demand conformity to its standards of child rearing was greatly circumscribed by the high ratio of clients to investigators. In Manitoba most applicants were never investigated before being granted an allowance because there were only six visitors for the entire province; in Ontario there was only one investigator per 300 cases.⁴³ As mothers' allowance programs grew, this ratio became even more imbalanced. Thus, by 1942 in Saskatchewan there was only one investigator for every 1,700 allowance cases.⁴⁴

Adherents of the social control thesis, who stress the one-directional, top-down hegemony of the State, ignore the fact that the dynamic between beneficiaries and government can be viewed as one of negotiation, even when power relations are not equally distributed.⁴⁵ Mrs H. Huntley, who had had to wait before applying for a mothers' allowance because of the dilatoriness of the federal Pension Board, and who in the interim was forced to part with her children, was more than willing to conform to the middle-class norms established by the commission, stating in a letter to Premier Ferguson, 'i am strait woman and respectable and keep my children nice and home all so clean.'⁴⁶ Many widows agreed to expel their single male boarders when it meant gaining access to a non-stigmatizing mothers' allowance that would enable them to avoid municipal relief, private charity, and the aid of relatives and neighbours. Mrs Annie McKie poignantly expressed her circumstances to Premier Ferguson: 'Understand, that Mothers' Allowance is the only thing between health and me.'⁴⁷ This widow was complaining not about the strictures that government officials were placing on her behaviour, but about the parsimony of her benefits. Indeed, in a later letter to the premier, this savvy widow from Paris, Ontario, admonished the premier that if other women with only one child were getting an allowance – namely widows in British Columbia – she should be entitled to the same consideration.⁴⁸

In most communities in Canada, there was little work available for

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 143

widows that paid well enough for them to keep home and children together. The vast majority of widows were forced, like Mrs McKie, onto municipal relief. Because they had to demonstrate destitution before being granted relief, widows were often forced to sell many of their household goods; worse still, when widows of skilled workers and salaried men, who had once occupied a respectable position in the community, were forced into these situations, their precipitous decline in income and status became public knowledge. The desperation of widows to avoid the stigma of municipal assistance explains the large number of begging letters in which helpless widows described their plight in lurid detail to provincial premiers and, in the depths of the Great Depression, to R.B. Bennett, the prime minister. Local Reeves and mayors often sponsored the widows in their communities, not simply out of humanitarian concern, but because they wished to lighten their relief rolls. As a result of these efforts to shift the burden of welfare assistance to the provincial level, conflicts often arose between local boards and the Toronto office of the Mothers' Allowances Commission. Municipal élites tended to defend the rights of widows; at the same time, in order to ensure that widows remained the financial responsibility of the Mothers' Allowances Commission, they were also more stringent in forcing delinquent widows to conform to conventional mores. 'I do not know what the unsatisfactory conditions are that have caused this suspension,' complained the mayor of Huntsville to the commission, 'but I must say that someone has to take care of this woman, and she is left now to be taken care of by Relief or charity, and I do not think that she should be thrown on our hands without giving the municipality an opportunity to clear up whatever conditions might prevail.'⁴⁹

Widows often preferred to be investigated by strangers when the alternative was to suffer the scrutiny and judgment of relatives. One applicant, who lost her husband to the influenza epidemic, was forced along with her six children to move to her married sister's farm, where she was compelled to take up the drudgery of milking cows.⁵⁰ Some mothers' allowance beneficiaries simply withstood the stream of urgent advice offered by female visitors, the majority of whom were educators and public health nurses.⁵¹ Others may well have appreciated practical advice for improving their health and that of their children. To the modern eye such advice on 'scientific motherhood' may seem unduly paternalistic, and indeed, some of this advice may have been impossible for women to follow, given the shortage of indoor

144 Engendering the State

plumbing, hot water, and other modern amenities. However, in an era when many working-class widows lacked the resources to seek professional medical attention, the advice from investigators and the pamphlets they distributed on maternal and neonatal health did not go unwelcomed. As Helen Reid conveyed to Charlotte Whitton in 1925, thousands of Canadian women desperately sought information: 'married women reporting need of advice to prevent miscarriages, death of babies after birth due to accidents "which the doctor said he couldn't prevent," deaths of premature babies (wife 35 years, 10 babies – 5 dead at 8 & 6 mos etc.); asking also for help with health of their children. Instructions re. breasts, *intercourse!* venereal disease etc. asked for by pregnant women & the unmarried mother who want to do right by her coming child.'⁵²

Many women were willing to endure a certain amount of intrusion into their lives (albeit many tried to avoid such monitoring by being conveniently absent when the investigator called) in exchange for a regular monthly cheque in the mail, which provided a measure of financial security and a great deal of peace of mind. After all, this system of benefits allowed them to raise their children in their own home.⁵³ On the whole, working-class widows were quite willing to accept help from visitors – such as the sending of extra milk for hungry children – and to tolerate criticisms of their housekeeping and personal cleanliness, and to conform to rules against keeping male boarders. At the same time, however, they adamantly defended their right to control their family budgets and fought against any exercise of state authority over this particular aspect of their lives. One angry beneficiary told an especially prurient investigator that 'the money was hers to do with as she wished and they couldn't tell her what to do with it.'⁵⁴ As so many case files demonstrate, working-class women were willing to accept injunctions against male visitors, as well as endless investigations by prying female social workers, but they balked at having the government instruct them on how to manage the family economy. Mrs C, an Austrian-born widow who had lost her husband, a homesteader in Manitoba, accepted years of government intrusion into her life. But when the Manitoba government ordered her to hand over her savings to the government's own bank, she decided to finally seek work rather than accept state assistance.⁵⁵

More often, however, women protested more fiercely when they were denied benefits. Like most other married women of her generation, Mrs Hannah Campbell of Burritt's Rapids, Grenville County, did

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 145

not take up paid work following her marriage. Adhering to the male breadwinner ideal, she believed that the government should provide for her when her incapacitated husband could not:

I would like to know if you intin to send that money to me at all if you dont do as you say I wile have you pulled for not doing as you say and I want the marriage certificates at once therefore all right the ones that you got first your a smart lady to promise a thing and not do it now send me what I tould you to do and 29 doolars for my trouble of runing to the office and the chair man said that just as soon as the papers was sent he would send me the check soget to work or you will loose your position I want it at once for my husband is not able to cut any wood for me and the lock master had to supley me with some wood they took up a cection for it and eatubeels to so send it at once and dont be so stiff so if you have plenty share up with poor people if they keep such ones in position they are smart folks to have the likes of you in such a place that cant acsts as they aught.⁵⁶

As Bettina Bradbury has argued, in industrializing Montreal during the nineteenth century the vast majority of working-class women did not work for pay outside the home, and only 5 per cent of women with husbands living worked for wages.⁵⁷ These contours of married women's work are borne out by evidence from Winnipeg. A surviving set of 1918–19 application forms from 124 Winnipeg widows affirms Bradbury's conclusions. Of this group, of whom 8 were Canadian born, 54 were British immigrants, and the remaining 62 were Eastern European immigrants, only 1 woman worked after she was married. Although British women were more likely to have worked before marriage than European women (61 versus 44 per cent), in both immigrant communities women were compelled to seek work after the breadwinner died even though none had been 'expected to work' while married. Fully 76 per cent of British widows worked after their husbands died, while 55 per cent of European immigrant women worked. Either the latter could not find suitable employment or, as the evidence suggests, there were stronger kinship and ethnic support groups available to them to soften the economic loss of the husband. What is particularly striking, however, is that even widows who did find work usually suffered a drastically reduced standard of living, relative to that provided by the husband (who was likely to have worked in the burgeoning skilled trades attached to the Winnipeg railyards) and even relative to

146 Engendering the State

what they earned themselves before marriage. One Scottish widow, a trained nurse prior to her marriage to a bank clerk, was forced to take up the first available work – namely sewing, washing, making paper flowers, and, finally, taking in lodgers. Women who worked as domestics for a mere \$10 to \$12 a month prior to marriage could not obtain even these meagre wages once they were widowed, because they were encumbered by young children. While overall, Eastern European men did not earn as much as their British counterparts, their widows faced similar deprived existences. Most of them were forced to work for the first time in their lives, and many worked very sporadically before applying for a mothers' allowance, and relied heavily on church and ethnic benevolent societies. The precarious existence of these immigrant widows is exemplified by the experience of one Ruthenian woman who, on failing to find even suitable housework because of her many children, was threatened with deportation if she applied for local relief again. What is significant about this profile of 124 Winnipeg widows is that only 3 of them reported that their children worked. What this remarkable statistic reveals is that the conventional pattern of working-class life that families encouraged their children to work was beginning to unravel following the First World War. Despite the proclivities of welfare officials, this process accelerated once working-class women were offered the alternative of government assistance.⁵⁸ What is also evident from these 124 applications is that all of these women preferred government aid to outside work that compelled them to leave their children unattended.

Everywhere in Canada, married women were reluctant to enter the paid workforce. Women's importance as home managers precluded them from taking formal, full-time paid work outside the home; this is borne out by the fact that in the first decades of the twentieth century, the vast majority (89 per cent) of beneficiaries applying for mothers' allowance in Ontario reported that they had had no employment outside the domestic sphere.⁵⁹ As Marjorie Cohen has noted, by 1921 only 2 per cent of married women worked, and 20 per cent of working women were widows. However, few of these would have been factory workers, as they would have preferred domestic service.⁶⁰ For example, most women in Nova Scotia took in sewing or laundry, or hooked mats, or kept post offices, or took in boarders. Mothers' allowance legislation did not seriously disrupt these established patterns. However, to some extent the range of women's work options was in the long term limited by mothers' allowances. For example, the strong prohibi-

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 147

tion against taking in male boarders would have created real duress for many women who had depended on this slightly more lucrative form of home work.⁶¹

Mothers' allowances were not necessarily detrimental to the economic standing of the family. Just as with the Canadian Patriotic Fund, the standard of living of widows of skilled workers would have distinctly fallen, but women whose husbands had been unskilled or seasonal labourers would have seen their incomes rise. That being said, the main point to remember is that the income a widow could earn on her own was invariably far less than the wages of her husband. Mothers' allowances permitted a widow to avoid the double-burden of paid and unpaid work, and allowed her to devote her entire attention to the raising of her children. It is in the context of *women's* wages, not the wages of the male breadwinner, that the economic contribution of mothers' allowances must be assessed. On the death of the male breadwinner, widows (many of whom had never worked) would have been compelled either to become domestics, which paid at most \$25 per month, or to enter factory work as unskilled labour, earning apprentice's wages of only \$11 to \$12 per month.⁶² In the biscuit and confectionery trade an experienced female worker earned \$50 per month, and in the needle trades upwards of \$44 per month, while a salesgirl could make between \$20 and \$50 a month.⁶³ Such wages, however, depended on a full-time job – an undertaking either impracticable or undesirable for a widow with young children.

Because most widows had never worked for wages, their lack of skills would have relegated them to the bottom rungs of the industrial workforce. Thus, the only real option for widows would have been domestic service (in urban areas) or municipal relief (in smaller towns and rural areas). It is within this context of long hours and low wages for women that one must place the favourable response of working-class women to the mothers' allowance legislation. For the many women whose husbands had been skilled workers or salaried men, the act of having to take up work in a factory was an all too obvious symbol of their downward change of class status. Mrs Mina White of Winnipeg had been warned that the allowance was only meant to support her until her 'girlie' could go out to work; nevertheless, she wrote to Charlotte Whitton, 'to thank you for the interest you have taken in my case. There is a relief off my mind to think I am going to get a mothers' allowance and I do hope and trust there will not be a hitch anywhere.'⁶⁴ Similarly, Mrs Eva Carriere wrote to the Rev. Peter Bryce,

148 Engendering the State

chairman of the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission, 'to tell you what a blessing your pension is. Now we poor widows and orphans can live like other people and have some pleasure. Before we had this pension our poor kids were certainly to be pitied but now they can pass with the others and be safe from hardships.'⁶⁵

While widows often agitated for higher allowances,⁶⁶ it cannot be disputed that the vast majority of deserving widows believed their primary role in life was to raise their children, and that they preferred accepting state welfare to working outside the home. Because work was an enforced necessity, it was not seen as an expression of self-worth and economic independence when it conflicted with responsibilities in the home. Public assistance offered low benefits and its officials tended to be interfering, but widows still preferred it because it spared them from having to combine paid work with house work. When Charlotte Whitton sent questionnaires to Manitoba widows who had been on the mothers' allowance scheme, one of the respondents emphasized that she viewed state allowances as the preferred route to economic independence, and contrasted those benefits forcefully with the long years of unexpected and unwelcome work dipping chocolates at a Winnipeg candy factory. This meagre wage still compelled her and her daughter to live under paternal control in the household of her parents. As Mary Axworthy angrily conveyed to the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, when asked what she did when her allowance was refused on the grounds that she only had one child – who like her mother was consigned to working in the candy factory, although she had aspirations for college – 'therefore you can please yourself what you do about this answer has I have had to work 22 years to keep myself and daughter.'⁶⁷

One should be cautious about accepting at face value the statement by Elizabeth Shortt that the Mothers' Allowances Commission was 'not concerned too much about whether a woman is respectable,' given that it was a response to criticisms that the government gleaned too much of its information regarding beneficiaries from neighbours.⁶⁸ Her statement does, however, elucidate that the system of state welfare that mothers' allowances established was based not so much on moral regulation (of sexual behaviour, character, and homemaking skills), as on the reinforcement of family economic interdependence.⁶⁹ The paramount goal of policymakers was to foster in mothers and their children positive economic values such as 'ambition, thrift and independence.'⁷⁰ With this in mind, they abjured the recommendations of

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 149

reformers and organized labour and actively encouraged paid work for beneficiaries and their offspring. The monthly allowances for widows, which ranged from between \$30 and \$40 for rural women and between \$40 and \$55 for those in urban areas,⁷¹ were deliberately set at levels that would compel women to take paid work. A widow was now expected to replace the former male breadwinner as a role model and thus demonstrate to her children the value of responsibly supporting one's family.

The Annual Reports of the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission were laced with accounts of how government assistance had instilled in recipients the virtues of self-help. One woman began by taking in infants, and now operated a children's wear business out of her home. Another began by picking potatoes, and now had a thriving market garden.⁷² In their efforts to champion the work ethic, even among women, policymakers turned a blind eye to 'baby farming' as long as it served to induce the spirit of family self-support. The widow of a superintendent at the Piggott Lumber Company who boarded other families' babies was lauded for her initiative and ambition – character traits she apparently passed along to her young son, who organized a paper route for himself.⁷³ Administrators of mothers' allowances celebrated those families who had 'been adjusted to the industrial world.'⁷⁴ The policy of mothers' allowances was that 'even a small allowance [is] a stimulus to families who are discouraged';⁷⁵ it insisted that both men and women work as a buffer against idleness and pauperization. In this way it rejected the notion, long argued by maternal feminists, that poverty and gender were linked, and placed greater weight on the need for government welfare strategies that would reinforce private family welfare and self-support in the future. As a result of these economic policies, many widows were compelled to move from job to job in search of some modicum of financial security. In one not unusual case, a woman was deserted by her husband, a skilled machinist earning \$75 a month.⁷⁶ Although the mother's allowance provided her with sufficient economic independence that she was able to leave her parents' home, the granting of state assistance marked the beginning of years of scrutiny and manipulation by investigators, who cajoled her into leaving a factory job, ordered her to rid herself of her male cousin who boarded with her, and instructed her to take in sewing. During the Depression, when sewing failed to support her family, she was forced to move several times in search of good wages and good working conditions.⁷⁷

150 Engendering the State

Children and mothers were thus coerced into contributing to their household sustenance as a replacement for the male breadwinner. This amounted to a forced reordering of deeply held working-class ideals of domesticity. The vast majority of mothers who applied for state aid listed themselves as homemakers – a demonstration of the degree to which working-class wives held, as firmly as their middle-class supervisors, to the belief that the pre-eminent and natural function of women was the rearing of children and the management of the home. Working-class wives, especially those of skilled workers, likewise perceived that their respectability and economic independence flowed from their role as dependants of responsible, wage-earning husbands. This arrangement of the home and workplace was not always practicable for working-class wives; but their economic stratagems always had this ideal as the goal.⁷⁸ Mothers' allowance policies were tailored to coerce women into the paid workforce, and as such they were a fundamental challenge to the culture of working-class family life; moreover, they forced on these women the unwelcome double burden of both outside paid work and child care. Mothers' allowance legislation attempted to impose cultural values on working-class families. In the same vein, a segment of middle-class feminist opinion (represented by Elizabeth Shortt) held that work was an axiom of female emancipation, and it was this opinion that was embraced by non-feminist male policymakers, who wanted widows to enter the workforce on the grounds that it maintained the values of family self-sufficiency. Working-class widows, however, preferred paternalistic policies whereby the State acted as the economic replacement for their lost husbands, because it enabled them to preserve their function as non-wage-earning mothers, on which their notion of respectability and independence hinged.

With the goal of protecting the domestic ideal of the male breadwinner maintaining his dependants, middle-class government officials mounted what was in effect an attack on working-class women's notions of work. Welfare policymakers were willing to countenance the temporary breakdown of the breadwinner ideal that their encouragement of women's work represented, in order to achieve their higher goal of reforming delinquent families so that young male children would learn the social value of working for higher wages in order to responsibly support their dependants. The ideal toward which state welfare hoped to work was described by G.B. Clarke in 1928: 'It was with great interest that the Friendly Visitor of the first family to be

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 151

granted an allowance by the Winnipeg Committee, that this mother was no longer living in Manitoba and that her children were all in good positions, were happy and successful and supporting their mother as a matter of course.⁷⁹ A fictitious 'specimen record' of a case history of a widow in Winnipeg demonstrated the correct economic configuration of families on welfare. It recorded the life of a widow whose Swedish husband had been employed as a brakeman on the CPR. Before her marriage she had worked as a domestic, but she refrained from working after marriage. When her husband's workman's compensation and union insurance ran out, the widow once again worked as a part-time office cleaner; her son, an office boy for a printing company, and the State, through mothers' assistance, supplemented the income of the temporary female head of the family.⁸⁰ This model of family interdependence was reinforced in all provincial mothers' allowance jurisdictions. As Dr Jamieson, the chairman of the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission, had this bland reply to the demands of Mrs Isabella Curtiss for a level of assistance commensurate with the wages of her husband: 'I am quite aware the amount granted under the Mothers' Allowance Act is not sufficient to maintain a family entirely, the intention being to assist a mother in the maintenance of her children.'⁸¹ The onus was on the widow to become the main breadwinner and head of the family; state allowances were to be the wife's 'pin money' – supplements to the main family income. Women were thus encouraged to do 'a man's work' as a means for encouraging cooperative family effort. One woman was urged by investigators to remain on the family farm in Ontario (the commission was studiously aware that the allowance system could be used to help arrest the rapid depopulation of rural Ontario), to be helped by her blind sister and disabled husband.⁸²

In their efforts not to diminish independence and initiative within the home, investigators encouraged the reversal of traditional gender norms by encouraging disabled husbands to supervise the children while their wives became 'the wage earner.'⁸³ Many widows were granted an allowance as a sop to induce them to work – along lines deemed appropriate by investigators. One husband was incapacitated and living on the family farm. His wife was granted an allowance on the condition that she leave her factory employment in Toronto and work the land until her children were old enough to manage it independently and support their parents.⁸⁴ That these breaches of the male breadwinner ideal were seen as merely temporary exigencies, and that

152 Engendering the State

family independence remained the lodestar of state welfare policies, is illustrated by cases in which the breadwinner was only temporarily absent. One woman had an abusive husband who had been confined in an insane asylum. On his release from the hospital, the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission argued that he was fit to take up remunerative work. To force the issue, the commission revoked his wife's allowance. The desperate municipal authorities of the village of Arthur petitioned on the wife's behalf against the return of this violent, abusive, unfit parent to both his home and his community; yet the government adamantly upheld the sanctity of the marriage contract, even though relations between husband and wife had broken down twelve years earlier after another woman gave birth to the husband's child and, after years of abuse, the wife on several occasions prevented the husband's return. Public officials maintained that the return of the natural breadwinner obviated the need for further government assistance to the family. 'The question of the responsibility of the care of the family,' wrote the chief investigator in 1928, 'has thus been removed from the Mothers' Allowance Commission and is one that must be decided between Mrs A and her husband. I have no doubt that Mrs A could get in touch with her husband if she so desires and find out from him directly whether or not he is able to work and support his family.'⁸⁵ A few months later, the husband conveniently died of an anemic condition. After the widow was able to demonstrate her willingness to work as a caretaker in the local Presbyterian church and had ensured that all her children over sixteen contributed to the family, her allowance was reinstated.⁸⁶

Even though the National Council of Women and various labour unions had campaigned hard for the abolition of child labour, the overseers of mothers' allowance policies awarded benefits more readily to families in which the mother encouraged her older children to contribute their wages to the family economy.⁸⁷ In the case referred to earlier, of the mother in Grenville County who was rebuked by an investigator for keeping an unclean household and who was forced to clean it on the spot, the conflict over the issue of cleanliness amounted to a rhetorical veneer for a more important issue – the parents' lack of control over their adolescent children. The investigators evinced much more sympathy for this family – in which the father was an incapacitated eighty-three-year-old, and in which there were nine children under fourteen and two over eighteen – when the 'frail and worn' wife worked as a domestic and when the two older children contributed to

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 153

the family's income. In 1927, the female case worker still held out hopes of reforming this family and impressing on them the ideal of self-sufficiency, and she praised the husband for staying at home to care for the children while his wife worked, and she described the house as 'always neat and house looked better than usual.' That cleanliness was being used in this situation as a metaphor for the work ethic became obvious when the investigator then stated: 'She [the mother] is always ready to work when she can get it, and everyone agrees that she is a hard working woman and people are glad she is getting the allowance.' But by 1933 cracks had begun to appear in the investigator's perceptions of this family's worthiness; she reported that although the mother remained 'energetic, tidy, simple, kindly, working hard,' she had however, lost control of her progeny, who 'as they become wage earners are shiftless and take no responsibility with the home or parents.' Seemingly oblivious to the fact that this was 1933, the worst year of the Great Depression, the female case worker now began to describe the father as 'careless and untidy' and sought tighter control over the family economy by having their government assistance managed by a trustee. The overall goal of the mothers' allowance system – to enforce family cooperation – was finally achieved when the father became a janitor at the local public school, the mother charred for \$12.00 a week, the older son worked for \$2.00 a day as a casual labourer, and the eldest daughter contributed \$10.00 a month to support her younger siblings. The family's total income was now approximately \$90.00 per month, which meant that the government benefit of \$30.00 per month was now serving its purpose, which was to compel this family to construct a parallel system of private welfare.⁸⁸

During the 1920s and 1930s the monitoring by the State of the economic contributions of older children became more intense. In part, this was because the paradigm of the economic interdependence of the working-class family – so well described by Bettina Bradbury – seemed to be breaking down: offspring were beginning to perceive their work in increasingly individualistic terms and were becoming reluctant to contribute their earnings to their widowed mothers and younger siblings. That the domestic ideal in which all family members contributed voluntarily to the family economy was no longer integral to working-class life was alluded to by one beneficiary of mothers' allowances. Having been deserted in 1927, this woman believed that either her husband or the State should support her. She asserted a more modern and individualized conception of the meaning of work

154 Engendering the State

when she told the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission that 'it is not right that I should be dependent on them [my children] when there is a government who looks after other matters.' Welfare investigators were noticing more and more that parents were losing control of their adolescent offspring. This may have reflected a social reality, rather than merely frustration with families who seemed to be evading their responsibilities. Many male children appeared to be balking at working-class traditions that set family duty above individual ambition. As the deserted mother described above went on to state: 'And my son that has been keeping us for the last seven years has left home to earn a little money for himself he is twenty three years old and thinks I should have help from somewhere else he says as long as he stays home and keeps us no one else will help us so I had to ask for relief the 10th of February as he had not worked all winter and nothing doing around here he got a chance on a boat and took it there are five of us left and they are cutting us 10.00 on May 1st.'⁸⁹ This change in cultural mores concerning the family economy was, of course, exacerbated by the onset of the Depression, which further eroded the inter-generational nature of the family economy by precluding potential wage-earning adolescent children from working.

As the ideal of family responsibility extolled by the Mothers' Allowances Commission became increasingly impossible for families to approach, conflicts between female beneficiaries and their middle-class overseers sharpened. The perceptions of female investigators of their clients became more pejorative, and the behaviour of the State more punitive toward these supposedly delinquent and 'pauperized' families. A mother from Muskoka applied in 1925 for a mothers' allowance for her and her six children aged three to eleven. Her husband had been first jailed and then committed to the Mimico hospital for the insane after physically abusing her and their children. She was characterized by visiting investigators as a responsible and thrifty mother and was permitted to handle her government benefits without supervision. Later, however, she refused to allow her husband back into the family circle, and then she failed to compel her grown sons to work. At this point she became the object of intense government scrutiny and was accused by investigators of hiding information and attempting to mislead them. A yawning gap had appeared between working-class and middle-class perceptions of idleness and work. In 1934 the case worker reported:

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 155

The two elder boys got jobs in a camp on the highway work but after being there for about a week came home again as the condition of the camp was such they could not stand it. Mrs. H. said to Mr. Smith and myself that there was so much drinking in the place that the boys could not put up with it.

As we both told her it was simply that neither E. or the boys wanted to work so long as they could loaf about with her to support them and provide them with food. It was a case of absolute laziness, and I do not see why the Commission should provide her with money to keep them.⁹⁰

State regulation of working-class family life revolved not around the mothers' moral deficiencies, but rather around their economic behaviour and that of their offspring. As the statistics gathered by the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission demonstrate, only 21.6 per cent of women lost their benefits because of poor home conditions. When widows had their allowances rescinded, it was usually because their children were old enough to work, because they had remarried, or because it was believed they could be self-supporting.⁹¹ The granting of mothers' allowance depended on family members being able to demonstrate a sustained work ethic. A French-Canadian woman from Timmins, Ontario, had her application turned down because her oldest male child – a labourer – worked but contributed nothing to the household. The investigator's criticism of his immoral pastime of smoking was in fact rhetorical window dressing for the more substantive invective directed against his failure to support his dependent mother and younger siblings. This woman was forced to go on municipal relief. She was granted the less stigmatizing mother's allowance eight years later, only after she ensured that her two oldest children, a domestic and a labourer, together contributed substantially more than the \$25.00 of government assistance.⁹² Likewise, a widow from Scarborough was described as a 'good mother' when her girls began working at a hosiery factory and her son became a farm labourer nearby.⁹³

Many women who hoped that their children would rise higher than themselves measured the State's intrusiveness by the degree to which it sought to interfere with the economic relations of the family. They did not welcome those investigators who exposed the emerging tensions between the older and younger generations over whether work was for collective or individual benefit. As the *Second Annual Report* of the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission remarked concerning

156 Engendering the State

the case of a woman who fought to keep her three oldest children at home: 'The mother at first resented the suggestion that she was at all to blame for her older children's desertion of the home, but finally accepted the advice and this winter the home has had less friction and is much happier.'⁹⁴ Just as working-class youths were attempting to free themselves from the constraints of older working-class family economic strategies, in which children were expected to contribute their wages to the maintenance of the household, governments began seeking through their welfare policies to coerce already socially distressed families into adhering to these older practices of family interdependence – this, even though as the Depression took root, these practices were becoming untenable. Working-class widows wanted the State to wholly assume the responsibilities of the male breadwinner. The government would thus be protecting them against the encroachments of paid labour, and thereby helping maintain their respectability. Working-class women believed they were being paid by the State for the work of mothering their children, and they accepted the assertions of policymakers that mothers' allowances were not a form of charity because women were being paid 'a wage for public service.' Thus, they were resentful when middle-class male policymakers began to make paid work a precondition for entitlements. For all their rhetoric about the home being 'the heart of the nation,' those who administered mothers' allowances did not define women's access to state welfare solely in terms of motherhood. By asserting that women as well as men had to work in order to avoid the social disease of pauperization, government policymakers were flouting time-honoured poor law conventions that women with children should earn the right to outdoor relief without working; by breaching such gendered conceptions of work, they were also temporarily setting aside cherished norms of domesticity.

As *The Fourth Annual Report* of the Ontario Mothers' Allowances Commission attested, it did not allow 'full maintenance of the family,' but urged the mother to save and work. Her role was precisely that of the male breadwinner: 'Were the allowance made to cover the full maintenance it would create wastefulness and probably laziness ... The encouragement thus given to the mother to be industrious and endeavour to get along has a good deal to do in making her family likewise.'⁹⁵ The 'patriarchal' state, then, was not usurping the role of the deceased *father*; rather, by offering mere 'assistance' by augmenting the main family income, it was functioning in the role that the *wife* or

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 157

children had traditionally occupied. Thus, mothers' allowances did not simply blur the lines between needs-based charity and rights-based social entitlements; because they imposed the double-duty of motherhood and paid labour, they left in dispute the question of whether a woman's entitlements derived principally from her role as mother or from her function as a wage earner. Were mothers' allowances to be, as many women and labour reformers were to argue in the following decades, the precursor of a broader 'maternalist' State? Or were they to be, as Mrs Shortt had envisioned, the stepping stone to a program of social insurance founded on the principle of male work?

The emphasis on maintaining economic cooperation within the family, and the emphasis on the responsibilities of the male breadwinner, would soon emerge as the twin pillars of welfare legislation. It was these principles that became enshrined in welfare policymaking, rather than the feminist principles of economic independence for women, a gendered vision of poverty, and a conception of social citizenship founded on the national service of motherhood. This held long-term implications for the development of the Canadian welfare state. In many respects, gendered views of work and poverty and the ideal of separate spheres greatly worked in women's favour insofar as these social norms helped confirm motherhood as a basis of state entitlement. Mothers' allowances were decisive in creating an early maternalist bias within state welfare formation, because they created a niche of female-specific entitlements. However, these rights for women remained enmeshed within the larger social imperatives (shared both by feminists and male policymakers alike) of national efficiency, the enhancement of male wages, and the reinforcement of family solidarity and self-sufficiency. All of these economic arguments were crucial in marshalling public support for mothers' allowances; however, this largely 'maternalist' agenda served, in fact, to buttress the position of skilled male workers. The creation of an ostensibly 'maternalist' state based on new conceptions of social citizenship was tethered ineluctably to a decisively male-centred set of economic imperatives. Canadian feminists, unlike the more radical of their British counterparts, were not willing fundamentally to critique the sanctity of the male wage contract; they were less interested in promoting the individual rights of women than they were in seeking public means for affirming community and familial duties and obligations. Consequently, mothers' allowances were seen not as a means to women's economic independence, but rather as a means for the State to buttress the more conser-

158 Engendering the State

vative imperative of family self-sufficiency. Mothers' allowances were in this sense paid not to the mother, but to the children and to the family as a whole.

Most middle-class feminists saw in the exaltation of motherhood a means for advancing the rights of women. For that reason they employed traditional concepts of gender roles to adumbrate a new notion of social citizenship, from which flowed state entitlements for women who had lost, through no fault of their own, the male breadwinner. The more conservative tenets of Canadian maternal feminism reinforced male-centred business and labour interests, and so did not lead to any radical questioning of the pre-eminent role of the male breadwinner. That being said, working-class women accepted the notion of separate spheres and believed that their economic independence, the elevation of motherhood, and their social rights were founded on the fact that they were dependants of a responsible, earning husband. Fiercely holding to traditional norms of domesticity, working-class widows demanded that the State substitute entirely for the deceased breadwinner; they wanted state benefits to entirely replace the lost wage, so as to enable them to remain at home to raise their children. The fundamental issue that split reform constituencies, and that divided working-class widows and middle-class government officials, was not whether the system of mothers' allowances was needs-based or rights-based. Rather, it was whether social entitlements were to be grounded on motherhood or waged labour; whether state intervention would uphold gendered visions of work in the short-term; or whether the ideal of separate spheres would be temporarily abrogated in order to protect the breadwinner ideal (and its corollary of family independence) in the future.

Despite rhetoric that insisted on the primacy of motherhood, government policymakers in practice willingly transgressed traditional gender roles by forcing women to seek paid work outside the home, because of their overweening concern for reinforcing the work ethic and the ideal of family economic cooperation within working-class homes – an ideal they perceived as threatened by postwar unemployment, the dilution of skill among workers, the problem of desertion, and changes in how young people viewed their family responsibilities. All dimensions of government policymaking were permeated by the traditional concern with pauperization and by the broadly held fear of fostering dependency. This calculus, and its attachment to poor law traditions, was instrumental in shifting the basis of modern welfare

Mothers' Allowances and the Family Economy 159

entitlements away from motherhood toward waged labour. It was economic regulation, which eventually coerced women to work – and not the regulation of sexual morality and cleanliness – that was the primary goal of mothers' allowances. It was this dimension of mothers' allowances that transgressed against the well-entrenched values of domesticity that characterized working-class life.

During the 1920s, the question as to whether one's right to state assistance was based on the service of motherhood or on the act of working for wages hung in the balance. It appeared that the movement for unemployment insurance had been stymied by the movement for mothers' allowances, which had, because of postwar concerns over depopulation and national economic efficiency, effectively identified motherhood as the primary basis of state welfare entitlements. But because this system of maternalist welfare rights was sustained by a consensus that the position of the male breadwinner had to be defended, the notion of work-based entitlements was not extinguished; rather, it was preserved, and actually affirmed in the way that mothers' allowance legislation was actually applied. Once the cultural legacy of the First World War receded and fears about population growth were replaced by the overwhelming issue of unemployment, the emergence of a new system of welfare entitlements centring on unemployment insurance very quickly led to the disenfranchisement of women's social welfare rights, as paid work entirely eviscerated motherhood as the basis for state entitlements.