Towards Productive Welfare States: the structural and ideational bases of social investment policy reforms in Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

Since 1990, a number of welfare states in remarkably different parts of the world have developed surprisingly similar policy reforms. In Canada and Australia, for example, the idea of “investing in children” has been played out in a proliferation of social policies and programs aimed at early childhood education, child care, and support for families with children; in Japan and South Korea, the idea of “active welfare” has manifested in noticeable expansions of public provisions in child care, elderly care, and family support programs for single parent and working parent families. In all these countries new social policies are emphasizing family, women, and children, a policy sector that, unlike pension and health care, has been hitherto low on the government’s policy priority list, more a private matter rather than public policy concern. Indeed, as an indication of how much policy thinking has changed, in all these countries governments are now claiming that investing in children, women, and family is not only socially important, but that it is good for the country and the economy. So what happened? Why the sudden interests in family, women, and children? And what does this tells us about these welfare states, and how they may be changing?

This research compares Canada and Australia – two Anglo-Saxon liberal welfare states, and Japan and South Korea – two East Asian conservative welfare states within Asia Pacific region – in order to assess the significance of this apparent convergence in social policy reforms. The project asks whether these observations of similar social policy reform demonstrate a mere coincidence or a new and more universal public policy reform trajectory. It addresses the causes of these social policy changes, and asks why such seemingly different contexts produce such similar choices of policy solutions. Finally, this project asks what these changes tell us about the nature of welfare state transformation. Implicit in these questions are three sets of more fundamental questions: 1) what is the nature of welfare state today; 2) why do institutions change, and what are the mechanisms of institutional change; and 3) what role do ideas play in institutional change.

In this study, we apply political economic perspectives and build on historical institutional and power resource theories to understand processes of policy change in the four countries. We will first map out the nature and the extent of new social investment policy reforms vis-a-vis family, women, and children in the four countries since 1990. By documenting and analyzing descriptive and statistical data related to policy changes, we will construct a profile of social policy changes in each country in terms of a) content, b) fiscal and numerical priorities, and c) discursive changes associated with social investment policy reforms. Second, to understand causes and mechanisms of social policy change in these countries, we will analyze how structural-political factors and ideational factors interact to produce policy reforms. Though large and important, structural-political changes (e.g. economic globalization, post-industrial changes such as changes in family, gender, and demographic structures, and political regime shift) are considered here to serve primarily the contextual bases for policy changes. In other words, they provide contexts and motivations for policymakers and other political actors to mobilize for policy changes, without necessarily determining the direction or the choices of policy change. Rather, we consider ideational change as the more direct independent variable in this research. We will therefore examine ways in which social issues are understood and framed in public and policy discourses, discursive rationales for policy changes and choices of policy tools, and ideational competitions. To analyze changes in ideational orientation, we use “analytic narratives” — in-depth historical case examinations that highlight interactions between social and political structures, opportunities, and political actors’ choices. I theorize that structural-political changes provide motivations and opportunities for policy changes, but that the ideational orientation of political actors and the process of ideational contestations determine the direction and choice of policy changes.

This research builds on my recently completed SSHRC funded research project that compared and analyzed welfare state responses to structural and political pressures in Japan, Korea, and Italy. It also complements my two other current research projects, a United Nations Research Institute for Social Development sponsored project on political economy of care for which I am the principal investigator for South Korea, and Canada-Japan and Canada-Korea social policy research projects. All these research projects examine sources of social policy changes since the 1990s. The proposed research will allow me to challenge the current theoretical understanding about nature of welfare state, and allow me to contribute to academic and policy debates on the institutional change and the role of ideas in mediating institutional changes.