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RESEARCH

# Taking implementation seriously in assessing success: the politics of gender equality policy

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This article makes the case for the investigation of the post-adoption stages of gender equality policies. We develop the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Approach, built on: (1) the mix of instruments for policy action; (2) the process of inclusive empowerment in practice; and (3) gender transformation as the ultimate outcome. For the gender and politics community, we demonstrate the importance of incorporating implementation in taking policy success seriously; for the policy studies community, we show how engaging with gender provides a compelling critical case to test general propositions about policy success and the intersectional complexity of the policy process.

**Key words** public policy • implementation • gender equality • gender transformation • instruments • empowerment

**Key messages**

- Assessing gender transformation requires investigating the politics of gender equality implementation.
- Policy success is as much dependent on the content of the policy than on the way the policy is implemented.
- The Gender Equality Policy in Practice Approach enables the systematic assessment of the dynamics and determinants of successful gender equality policy.

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## In search of the elusive recipe for gender equality

While gender issues have not yet reached the status of a core issue on most international and domestic agendas, there is growing attention and official commitment to

promoting gender equality (Htun and Weldon, 2012, 2018; Annesley et al, 2014, 2015; Mazur, 2017). Specific gender equality programmes have been developed worldwide and across a broad range of sectors. Gender components have been added to many originally gender-blind programmes, and gender mainstreaming, although often with few concrete outcomes, is frequently presented as key for successful policy achievement regarding gender and sexual rights. Observers of this complex array of public policies thus reasonably expect improvements in gender and sexual equality on the ground.

While some tangible improvements have been made, as analysts attest, these ambitious goals are still far from being achieved in post-industrial democracies (Waylen, 2017; Verloo, 2018). While a rich scholarship examines gender policy and the state, the recipe for successful policies still remains as elusive as the formula to turn lead into gold. Have policies been powerless in redressing gender-related structural inequalities after all? We contend that policies have the potential to reduce gender and sexual inequalities but that we still need to systematically identify the conditions under which policies are likely to contribute to the dismantling of gender and sexual hierarchies of power and achieve gender transformation (Htun and Weldon, 2018). We argue that shifting the analytical focus from the politics of policy adoption to the politics of implementation is the best means for a thorough assessment of policy 'in practice'[1] – for determining the conditions under which policymaking would eventually contribute to the achievement of gender and sexual equality.

In this article, we propose just such an approach to gender equality policy in 'practice'.[2] Our central contention is that the key to exposing challenges, barriers and obstacles to gender and sexual equality is to shift the analytical microscope. Analysis must go beyond the policy-formation stage to the processes following adoption – implementation, evaluation and impact. To do so, we propose examining the politics of implementation through three distinct conceptual components: (1) policy outputs, composed of the mix of tools and instruments of policy action; (2) inclusive policy empowerment in the practice of policy; and (3) gender-role transformation as the ultimate policy outcome. We first examine the recent turn towards implementation in gender and policy research and make the case for more methodical comparative research that focuses on the post-adoption stage of gender equality policy. Next, we present the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Approach as a fresh way to assess policy success and failure and provide a detailed conceptualisation of the three analytical components. In the conclusion, we discuss the next steps for moving the Gender Equality Policy in Practice agenda forward and its implications for comparative gender policy studies, as well as for the study of democratic governance more broadly speaking.

## The implementation turn in gender and policy research

We have little systematic knowledge of the fate and impact of gender equality policies after they are adopted over a meaningful period of time and across a broad selection of policy areas. Gender and policy research to date has, indeed, mostly focused on the processes that lead up to the adoption of a governmental decision or policy. The agenda-setting and adoption phases of policy formation are typically examined with a particular focus on the content of policies, policy debates, issue framing and problem definition, with few connections to the crucial post-adoption phases.[3] Yet,

once formally decided upon, policy becomes part of a complex process and continues to be negotiated, often contested or even resisted, as it is implemented, monitored, evaluated, revised and/or terminated. Despite the relevance of implementation, research has typically not focused enough on the practice of implementation, beyond outputs or impact evaluation (Mazur, 2017). Scholarly preoccupations are nevertheless changing. There has been a recent call to switch attention to the post-policy adoption phase (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017; Mazur, 2017). For instance, scholars have assessed 'street-level' implementation (Lindholm, 2012; Callerstig, 2014; Cavaghan, 2017) and laid out how gender equality policies are put into action (Lombardo et al, 2009; Lindholm, 2012; Verloo and Walby, 2012; Bustelo, 2017). Renewed interest in implementation goes hand in hand with a steady increase in policy attention towards measuring policy outcomes in order to assess the level of gender equality. Gender equality data now figures in good standing with other key indicators of government performance. In line with the evidence-based requirements for policy action, these indicators are used for a broad range of functions and purposes, such as allocating funds or identifying areas for progress.

The post-adoption phases are key to determining the success or failure of any given policy. Post-adoption processes are typically dynamic and long-lasting. Hence, the core task when investigating gender equality after a policy decision has been made is not only to simply rank countries' performances, but to determine why some countries are more successful than others in promoting gender equality across considerable regional variation. Long is the list of policies that looked beautiful on the statute book but were never fully implemented. At other times, governments adopt policies that they simply have no intention of implementing. What is more often the case, however, is that governments make policies for which they lack the financial and/or organisational capacity to fully put into practice.

Furthermore, many of the broad issue areas that are important to equality goals include policies that address transversal problems through a broad range of instruments and structures. For example, employment equality entails, among other things, pay, promotion, training, benefits (such as unemployment and pensions) and recruitment (Ferragina, forthcoming). Policy on gender-based violence may cover domestic or intimate violence, rape, trafficking, harassment, and female genital mutilation. Each requires attention and coordination across several administrative departments. Employment policy implementation is part of the employment, education, benefits and possibly government procurement briefs, while policy to protect people from gender-based violence will be the work of police forces, courts, health services, social services and housing departments, many of which function at one or more international, national and sub-national levels. To accurately assess the long-term effectiveness of gender equality policies that have been on the books for over 40 years, we must move beyond the static approach of quantitative indices and take the scholarly turn to gender equality policy implementation to the next level.

## The Gender Equality Policy in Practice Approach: assessing mechanisms of policy success and failure

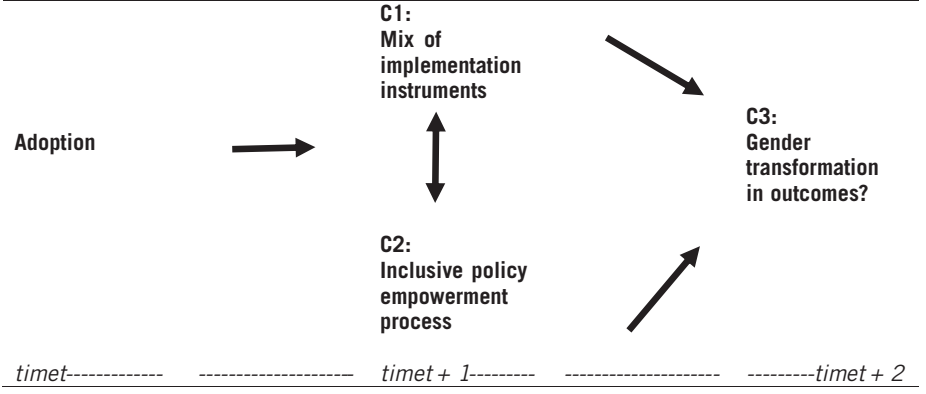
While the demarcation of the stages of the policy process are not clear-cut in the reality of policymaking, the primary analytical foci of our new approach are the stages of policy after adoption and the impact implementation and evaluation of those

policies across a diverse range of gender-related issues over a significant period of time and across a representative selection of post-industrialised democracies. We contend that it is these two post-adoption phases that are key to determining the success or failure of any given policy. In line with seminal work in policy analysis (Bardach, 1977), we conceive the implementation process as a political game where bargains and negotiations, resistance and opposition, and the diversion of policy intent take place and are significant in determining the conditions under which gender-related policies can be successful or not.

A first step in our approach is to clearly define the criteria for successful and failed policy in terms of Dye's (1992) 'outputs' and 'outcomes', an oft-contested issue for activists and analysts (Blofield and Haas, 2013). Outputs are the tools, instruments and processes that are used to implement and to evaluate equality policy. Outcomes are the changes that are expected to result from those policies. Our approach assesses which and how tools and instruments were actually used in the policy implementation and evaluation processes and if the output and process result, or not, in increasing the level of gender equality outcomes.

The Gender Equality Policy in Practice Approach seeks to trace causal mechanisms in terms of particular policies or programmes of policies. Were gender-based inequalities improved over time or was there reversal? Was improvement or backsliding a result of government action and practice or of some other changes in contextual factors and influences outside of these policies, such as economic transformations? In the language of variables, policy outputs are posed as potential intervening or crucial variables. Their importance to policy results can be expressed as a hypothesis, that is, post-adoption policy outputs do (or do not) lead to increasing gender and sexual equality in results. Here, we propose an analytical model built on three key components of the post-adoption phases of gender equality policy, as presented in Figure 1: (C1) the mix of implementation instruments for policy action; (C2) the process of inclusive policy empowerment in practice; and (C3) gender transformation as the ultimate outcome.

**Figure 1:** Analytical model of the gender equality policy in practice



## Component 1: the mix of implementation instruments

*Mapping the concept*

Policy instruments are not implemented in a vacuum, nor are they selected randomly. Rather, they are combined in specific implementation mixes that have long-term implications. It is this specificity of the mix of tools and instruments that we propose to more thoroughly assess. The selection of instruments is significantly influenced by contextual factors such as previous familiarity with the tool, policy advocacy and sectoral or national styles of policymaking, among other national context factors. Instruments also operate in interaction with each other; their effect can be enhanced, mitigated or reversed by other instruments.

Instruments, or tools, are the 'identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a public problem' (Salamon, 2002: 9). They define the type of good or activity to be delivered, the institutions or authorities in charge of the delivery, and the way in which it is delivered. The development of public action towards new modes of governance over previous decades has resulted in the diversification of the tools available for public action. The various classifications of instruments proposed in the literature converge on emphasising three common features of the policy implementation mix, here defined as the combination of various instruments assembled into specific sets for policy action. First, each type of instrument shares common characteristics that distinguish them from other types of instrument, but each instrument has its own specificities that vary across the context in which they are designed and implemented. Second, instruments not only prescribe action, but also define the way in which the action is implemented. As such, instruments contain prescriptions and rules about the actors involved in the implementation process, their functions in the implementation process and the nature of the relationships between these actors. Third, instruments for action are not limited to driving and constraining the behaviour of governments. The transformation of the modes of governance has resulted in the increasing involvement of private and mixed actors in the implementation of public action.

Ingram and Schneider (1990) distinguish between four broad types of instrument. First, *authority instruments* are the classic 'command-and-control' regulatory instruments. These tools aim at authorising, prescribing or banning particular behaviours. In the context of gender-related policies, one of the classic authority tools is the constitutional/legal prohibition of formal discrimination on the basis of sex or sexual orientation. Second, *incentive instruments* aim at achieving policy goals by nudging behaviours. In contrast to the authority tools, incentives do not impose regulatory constraints on behaviour, but provide encouragements for target groups to adopt or change a particular behaviour. These incentives can be positive – for example, an extraordinary budget allocation to reward the appointment of female professors in departments where they are under-represented – or negative –sanctions for failing to reach a particular target of female members on boards, for example, automatic exclusion from public bids, as in France, or going as far as dissolving public-listed companies, as in Denmark (Heidenreich, 2013). Third, *capacity* and *learning instruments* are the tools that provide resources, knowledge and skills to catalyse and coordinate the actions of individual policy actors. Gender-mainstreaming training in public administration specifically aims at informing and training civil servants about

the cross-sectoral impact of gender inequalities, particularly in policy sectors that have traditionally been considered as gender-neutral. Finally, *symbolic* and *hortatory instruments* are mostly communication tools that aim at emphasising positive aspects and values, and exposing negative aspects and values, linked to the targeted behaviour. Information campaigns about domestic violence and its consequences for women and children, for instance, aim at exhorting gender-related behavioural change.

*Applications*

Research on gender-based violence provides a useful illustration of the relevance of mapping out how instruments are combined for assessing policy responsiveness in practice. Htun and Weldon (2012) emphasise the relevance of implementation mixes, where a number of different types of tools are used to tackle the highly complex nature of intimate violence. Montoya's (2013) analysis confirms that a three-pronged approach is, indeed, more likely to lead to effective policies when combining the three 'P's' of 'protection, prosecution, and prevention'.

Abortion policies are another illustration of the importance of specific policy mixes for explaining variation in implementation. While abortion regulation has become more permissive across Western Europe, with the exception of Malta and Ireland, significant variation remains regarding the degree to which abortion has been effectively liberalised in practice. Scholarship has pointed out that abortion laws were often the result of a political compromise in Europe (Outshoorn, 1996; Engeli, 2012), where major concessions were made to medical and religious opponents alike. Among the principal concessions was the introduction of the so-called conscientious objection clause, which granted health professionals the right to refuse to practice abortion on moral grounds. In France, conscientious objection has been offset by a series of safeguards requiring individual physicians to reveal their objection to women at the time of the first meeting and public hospitals to provide abortion services regardless. To the contrary, Italy did not constrain the use of conscientious objections. As a result, over 80% of physicians refuse to perform abortion services in the south of Italy and abortion has become less and less accessible (De Zordo, 2017: 148).

## Component 2: the process of inclusive policy empowerment

*Mapping the concept*

The systematic analysis of policy success and failure in promoting gender and sexual equality should not stop at the inventory of the adopted instruments and their combination into policy implementation mixes. We contend that the analysis should further investigate the (often) contentious process through which government actions are implemented, the network of actors involved in implementation and the resources dedicated to the processes under study. While each implementation mix displays specific features and characteristics, their capacity for success is embedded in the context of the specific process that is put in place to implement them. Implementation is a battle for power, where a plurality of actors aim at maximising their capacity to influence the policy, either through pushing for its full implementation as originally intended at the time of adoption, or modifying the goals and scope of the policy, or even slowing it down or driving the implementation to a deadlock. Policy

implementation and evaluation are more to be seen as a new series of battles, rather than the sequel of the policy-adoption battle. To significantly weigh in on policy implementation and counter opposition, equity-seeking gender groups shall be included and empowered in the implementation process. For opponents who have not succeeded in imposing their policy preferences at the time of adoption, the implementation phase indeed opens up plentiful new occasions to exert decisive influence (Verloo, 2018). The same goes for the partners in alliance who had to accept compromises to see the policy adopted: they will not neglect any opportunity to re-inject the policy elements that they had to let go previously.[4]

We propose capturing the dynamic nature of the implementation and evaluation process of gender and sexual equality through the concept of inclusive policy empowerment. Our concept is drawn from the literature on gender and politics, which identifies empowerment, representation and the integration of the plurality of voices about gender equality as core principles according to which individuals, from all different backgrounds and contexts, have opportunities to be represented and participate in the political system in terms of their presence and ideas (Celis, 2012). Empowerment involves the inclusion of the claims, frames and solutions of the concerned groups as much as their physical integration in the policy process (Ferree et al, 2002). In a similar vein, McBride and Mazur (2010) emphasise the potential risks for achieving gender equality of a disconnection between the integration of the claims in the policy response and the exclusion of the claimants in the policy process.

The first implementation battle is frequently about the operationalisation of the policy goals. As Rose (1984: 185) puts it: 'stating a policy objective is no guarantee that it will be realized in practice'. Clear and specific policy objectives at the time of policy adoption are the exception rather than the norm. Policy goals are more often vague, ambiguous or even incoherent, and thus subject to considerable adjustment, if not overhaul, during the implementation phase. Even when policy goals are relatively clearly defined at the time of policy adoption, the likelihood that it will be subject to pressure for re-commensuration remains high. Evaluation is another locus for contention; the often-politicised context of evaluation, the political power or lack thereof of the evaluators, and disagreements about how to measure the original goals of a policy are just a few challenges to fair and meaningful policy evaluation, whether it be formative or summative, formal or informal, particularly in gender equality policies (Bustelo, 2017). As a result, in gender policy implementation and evaluation, the actors who represent them should have a prominent role in the contentious post-adoption processes.

### *Operationalising intersectionality*

The implementation process in a democracy should be inclusive so that it reflects the variety of demands of the groups and actors who make claims in the policy process. Assessing who is invited to join the implementation and whose claims are heard in the politics of implementation is thus a fundamental, yet challenging, task at the empirical level. Policies are rather sticky and severely influenced by the legacy of previous policy networks in power. Policy networks are often closed to outsiders and the likelihood of getting a seat at the table is significantly determined by advocacy resources and networks of relations. Advocacy groups are more likely to join the

process if they can deploy resources and capacity to significantly derail the process or rely on institutional or professional positions of prestige and power.

The issue of resource imbalance is particularly acute for gender equality policies. It has been amply demonstrated in the literature that gender-based groups are less resourceful, policy-wise at least, than established policy actors such as employers' associations, public services, trade unions, medical associations or religious groups. They often do not have a reserved seat at the policy table and have to mobilise to obtain one; many of the gender-based groups never reach this level in their advocacy lifetime. For instance, the abortion policies that were made and unmade without the participation of feminist groups in the policy process are numerous (Engeli, 2009). This was at least the situation at the inception of gender equality policies in the 1970s and 1980s.

Gender and policy scholarship tends to overlook the significance of the imbalance of policy resources that takes place within gender-based advocacy. The position from which gender-based advocates are legitimised to formulate claims about gender equality has probably as much impact on gender equality outcomes as the objective merit of their claims. Over the years, some advocacy groups have professionalised and institutionalised to become permanent members of policy networks (Costain, 1988). As such, they are likely to enjoy positions of (quasi-)monopoly over what gender equality should be. These advocacy groups occupy positions of privilege in the policy process that provide them with an ownership over the definition of gender equality that is too often left largely unquestioned (Halley et al, 2018). This position of privilege, in turn, legitimates the exclusion of other advocacy groups and severely impacts the capacity of policymaking to fully grasp the intersectional nature of gender equality (Bassel and Emejulu, 2010). Among the policy 'owners' of gender equality frequently stand groups of white and middle-class women that are well connected across policy sectors and that accumulate advantages over less-established groups advocating, for example, for women migrants or women from minority groups.

It is not that the call for intersectional perspectives in gender research has not resonated well in gender and policy research (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011; Bacchi, 2017). There is a general consensus that treating 'women' and 'women's rights' as homogeneous categories for policy action and impact evaluation misses the differentiated effect of public policy on groups located at the intersection of inequalities (Verloo, 2006; Walby, 2007). Nevertheless, there remains a gap between (intersectional) aspirations and (empirical) deeds. The adoption of an intersectional perspective lags behind in empirical research on gender and policy. Not only should 'women' or 'men' not be considered as homogeneous groups, but the diversity in policy advocacy should not be disregarded either. While scholarship has given great attention to proposing an operational distinction between women's groups and feminist groups in research (Beckwith, 2003), too few efforts have been spent on conceptualising the variation in policy preferences among women's, feminist, intersectional and LGBTQ groups. Too often, empirical studies simply assume that there is a high level of concordance among the policy preferences of the various concerned groups promoting gender and sexual equality. While it is unlikely that feminist, intersectional and LGBTQ groups would disagree on the generic principle of all human beings being treated equally, what 'equally' means and the ways in which it can be achieved is highly contested. It frequently happens that groups differ on their policy preferences and positions regarding specific policies: 'gender equality

actually consists of two concepts – gender *and* equality – that have acquired meaning related to aspects of gender but also related to aspects of equality (for example, class, race/ethnicity)' (Lombardo et al, 2009: 2). This difference can be quite substantial and lead to severe dislocations in policy empowerment if the various interests are not equally integrated in the process.

Ticking the box 'Have women's groups been included?' in policy research may have the illusion of simplicity but is unlikely to provide much understanding of the patterns of policy empowerment. Shifting the focus to the politics of implementation requires breaking apart empirical illusions of heterogeneous policy advocacy regarding gender and sexual equality and replacing it with a systematic assessment of the extent to which the diversity of gender and sexual equality-related claims has been integrated in the process through the actors who participated.[5] In other words, rather than only asking whether equality demands have been integrated in the process, policy research also needs to identify which equality demands have been rejected and question gender equality 'ownership'. Empirical research needs to systematically investigate whose equality it is and what the implications of this equality ownership over the policy empowerment process are.

### *Applications*

The controversy over the headscarf ban in French public schools is a telling illustration of the implications of exclusionary policy processes that legitimate one position against others (Gaspard, 2006; Scott, 2007). Groups articulating claims over the necessity to take into account *discrimination* and *economic vulnerability* were mostly excluded from the policy process, while groups advocating in favour of the ban were more integrated into it (Bassel and Emejulu, 2010: 526). While gender equality is by no means a stable notion, selective policy empowerment results in the differentiation of gender equality claims and making advocacy groups more hierarchical. In return, it is likely that the exclusionary policy process has contributed to the various advocacy groups drifting further apart.

The controversy about access to reproductive technologies is another example of the necessity to move away from a homogenised vision of gender advocacy and break down the process of selective policy empowerment. Feminist positions have greatly varied over how best to regulate access to reproductive technologies. Some national communities advocated in favour of broad access to reproductive technologies, while other communities joined forces with religious actors to ban reproductive technologies altogether or to accept a policy compromise that would allow only heterosexual couples to access reproductive technologies (Engeli, 2012). In most of the domestic debates about reproductive technologies, little attention was paid to the heteronormative nature of such regulation and the implications for sexual equality. LGBTQ groups were largely excluded from the policy process and most feminist groups did not mobilise their resources to relay their claims. Here, again, exclusionary policy empowerment resulted in a hierarchy of advocacy and a differentiated legitimation of gender and sexual equality, where certain groups, speakers and definitions of equality were distanced from the locus of power.

## Component 3: gender transformation as ultimate outcome

*Mapping the concept*

Moving from outputs and process to outcomes and impact, the last component assesses the extent to which gender policies have succeeded in eliminating gender and sexual hierarchies to create a more gender-just society. Following Htun and Weldon (2012: 208), gender equality is conceived here as the systematic '(dismantlement) of hierarchies of power that privilege men and the masculine, a sexual division of labor that devalues women and the feminine, and the institutionalization of normative heterosexuality'. We argue that gender and sexual equality will not be reached as long as gender transformation has not fully occurred. While gender accommodation is not without clear merits for advancing women's status, it does not directly tackle the hierarchies of power at its core. It only provides compensations for gender-related inequalities. Gender transformation is the only stage where gender/race/other privileges will be entirely dismantled to enable full gender equality.

While crucial to understanding what policy works and under what conditions, evaluating the quality of gender-related policy outcomes is not an easy task. Policy impact can only happen and be assessed over the long haul – at least 5–10 years after a policy has been put into place. New Public Management in administration has significantly increased the focus on (quantitative) key performance indicators, with little qualitative insights on the quality of policy performance. Finally, as Armstrong et al (2009: 267) put it: 'assessment raises dilemmas: quality according to what criteria; quality for whom; and quality of what?'. We propose considering gender transformation as an absolute or ideal policy outcome where gender and sexual equality would be fully achieved. As, unsurprisingly, there is no single policy or set of policies that have ever fully realised gender equality, gender transformation remains an absolute goal. Gender transformation is, thus, considered as the gold benchmark to measure the extent to which gender-related policies have succeeded in reducing the gap between the current situation of gender and sexual inequalities and the absolute goal of gender equality.

Forecasting ex ante the degree of success of a policy in promoting gender and sexual equality is a risky enterprise. As argued earlier, implementation is a dynamic process where policy battles take place. Gender and policy scholarship has pointed to a number of factors that may hinder or enhance policy success. Policy success at the adoption stage often implies making concessions and forging compromises to foster a broad policy alliance that may at the implementation stage push the policy further away from the original demands (Engeli, 2012). At the time of adoption, goals can be, at best, vague and, at worst, contradictory. During the implementation phase, opponents are provided with openings to reshape government action and partisans have opportunities to replay the cards they had to forgo during the adoption bargaining process. Some gender-based groups can be empowered through their active participation and receive increased attention to their claims in the process, while some others may be left aside and unable to contest, complement or expand the policy operationalisation of gender equality.

Even the content of the policy itself may hinder or favour successful implementation (Lowi, 1964). In their foundational work on gender and US policy, Gelb and Lief Palley (1979; see also Boneparth and Stopper, 1988; McBride Stetson, 1991) argued

that issues that do not directly contest the gender hierarchy of power by advocating *role change*, but instead fit into a more incremental perspective of serial adjustments towards *role equity*, are more likely to be picked up by governments. Other policy characteristics are likely to act in combination with the level of politicisation generated by the contestation/accommodation of gender hierarchy, such as the amount of financial and labour resources required and the degree of vertical/horizontal coordination among implementers (Banaszack et al, 2003; Haussman et al, 2010). Annesley, Engeli and Gains (2015) demonstrate that gender-related issues vary according to the level of political conflict and institutional friction generated by the issues. While *status-based policies* (Weldon and Htun, 2018) are rather unlikely to demand a high level of financial and labour investment, some of them are likely to generate high levels of political conflict due to the implied (radical) change in gender norms and expectations. To the contrary, *class-based policies* (Weldon and Htun, 2018), such as pre-school policies for example, are more likely to require substantial amounts of money and manpower in their implementation than status-based policies but could be perceived as less conflictual when they fit with the dominant policy idea of enhancing individual capacity to integrate and remain in the workforce over time.

### *Categorisation of gender outcomes*

Bearing in mind this complexity, we venture to propose here a categorisation of four possible outcomes of gender equality policies in practice. Our categorisation is based on the extent to which a policy resulted in either the tangible step towards the transformation of gender relations in society or towards the sole equalisation of opportunities without challenging the core of the gendered and heteronormative hierarchies of power. Obviously, gender transformation is a long-term process that can also be fuelled by the cumulative long-term impact of incremental changes, including equalising ones. Progression in transformation is very often to be assessed in light of the context where it takes place and the institutional and sectoral legacies in effect (Krizsnan and Roggeband, 2018). The process of gender transformation is not linear either. Reversal and backlash happen and are probably more likely when policies aim at radical change rather than incremental adjustments (Gelb and Lief Palley, 1979; Verloo, 2018). Finally, the process is very often asymmetric as well. Gender policies across Western Europe tend to fare better for some categories of women, that is, white middle-class women who can benefit from a number of privileges.

### *Outcome 1: gender-neutral*

In this outcome, the policy has failed in transforming gender relations or has even not attempted to do so. It is unlikely that much money or resources were invested in the implementation. In other words, the policy was symbolic: 'policy outputs with no outcomes' (Edelman, 1964; Cobb and Elder, 1983). There are numerous policies that did not result in any tangible effect on the promotion of gender and sexual equality or that were not even implemented at all. The first equal-pay policies often belong to this category of gender-neutral outcome. These policies were mostly programmatic and did not involve any financial or human resource investment for their implementation. They received broad political support but mainly because they aimed concretely at very little. Mostly symbolic, they did place the emphasis

on wage discrimination but barely contained any instruments that could have been implemented to actively support women's aspirations for equal pay (Mazur, 1995). No gender transformation has occurred following the adoption of these policies. Krizsnan and Roggeband's (2018) study of policies on gender-based violence provides another example of gender-neutral policy outcomes in shedding light on the implications of the discrepancy between the specific policies targeting gender-based violence and the overall aim of tackling gender inequality. Hungarian and Polish policies, for example, have gone as far as labelling policy on gender-based violence 'family violence policy', where the very notion of women being among the main victims of gender-based violence because of their gender is made invisible in an implementation focusing on the 'family'. As a result, these policies are likely, at best, to be gender-neutral in their generated outcome.

*Outcome 2: gender rowback*

Equality policies working against the promotion of gender equality occur more often than scholarship might hypothesise. It can take a variety of forms according to the type of resistance and opposition that has been mobilised against the implementation of gender-related policies (Woodward, 2003; Verloo, 2018). Gender-related policies can be largely derailed from their original intention, however laudable it might have been, to become a liability regarding the promotion of gender and sexual equality. Armstrong et al (2009), for instance, show how Tony Blair's employment programmes targeting specific groups of women, such as single mothers and women belonging to minority groups who have suffered from severe exclusion from the labour market, resulted in shaping a differentiated perception of worth regarding the insertion of women into the labour market. The New Deal policies created expectations, if not constraints, regarding women in situations of poverty who had to rely on welfare benefits to resume employment. At the same time, opportunities to dedicate time to care activities became a valued/legitimate choice for mostly well-off families. In a similar vein, Bacchi (2017) underlines how the Dutch reform of the welfare assistance system at the end of the 1990s had the ambitious goal of promoting women's greater access to the labour market but did so by requiring single mothers to return to work without providing any commensurate support for childcare. As Bacchi (2017: 32) argues, the reform resulted in '(constituting) "women" as carers', which is arguably a reverse effect of the original intent.

*Outcome 3: gender accommodation*

In this outcome, a number of policy effects can be tangibly assessed but the policy has mostly targeted accommodating or compensating traditional gender relations instead of transforming them. Decision-makers, bureaucrats and policy actors are known to lag behind social change and often continue to embrace long-held norms about masculine and feminine roles and reduce the diversity of gender identities to a female–male dichotomy (Cavaghan, 2017; Vis, forthcoming). Hence, 'men' may be pictured in the minds of policymakers and officials in their public role as family breadwinners, and 'women' may be thought of as the primary family caretakers, while rainbow families might remain largely ignored. Any gender policy based on these traditional gender-role assumptions will not achieve the core goal of transforming

behaviour to break down the unequal effects of traditional gender and heterosexual norms, expectations and patterns of behaviour. Nor will it address the ambiguities that we know confuse the relationship between gender identities, sexual orientations and traditional gender roles.

State-sponsored childcare programmes are typical examples of accommodation policies. Emphasising the impact of the neoliberal agenda on shaping work/welfare policies, Lewis (2006: 423) stresses that 'it is now assumed that women as well as men will be "citizen workers"'. Indeed, these policies have contributed to providing organisational support for women to integrate into the labour market and make the best market use of their professional skills. This has been done without necessarily challenging the gendered division of care activities at its core in the sense that they provide support for accommodating the feminine role of primary caregiver with economic independence.

Same-sex marriage is another example of a policy that may fall short of radically transforming gender relations. While it has equalised opportunities for same-sex couples to obtain legal recognition of their relationship, it has more often than not failed to contest the sexual hierarchy at its core. Some states continue to reserve access to adoption and reproductive technologies to opposite-sex couples, and thus still heteronormatively hierarchise marriage. Numerous additional barriers to full equality remain, for instance, in the way in which pensions, welfare benefits and child support are distributed. Policies aiming at gender accommodation are likely to be asymmetrical and worsen inequalities across groups of women, or to amplify privileges of specific groups of women while leaving other groups aside. For example, equality plans at universities have shown (some) positive results regarding the promotion of female academics to senior posts; however, the plans have generally been more beneficial to white middle-class than to minority women, who continue to experience exclusion.

### *Outcome 4: gender transformation*

Our last category of outcomes is by far the most ambitious and should be considered as a gold benchmark. Such changes in gendered and sexualised norms tend to be slow moving at best and are not easily measured. In addition, the nature of gender transformation is complex and contested. Research on gender policy formation has shown how gender is defined and instrumentalised to 'frame' policies and political action by policy actors (eg Lombardo et al, 2009). Thus, a 'transformation' in the dominant gender norms that drive public action needs to occur in order for gender equality policies that are formally on the books to be successful (Lombardo et al, 2009). Policy attempts at transforming gender and sexual relations may be more or less complex, and more or less far-reaching. For example, role-sharing in terms of caregiving and breadwinning would constitute a 'simple' transformative change provided that attitudes shifted with practice. In a more complex transformation, policymaker and public attitudes about appropriate caregiving roles would give way to the collapse of a binary notion of sex in favour of a more refined understanding of gender and heteronormativity.

*Addressing the 'What if?' problem*

What remains is the tricky question of causality in studying policy outcomes and the so-called problem of attribution. How can we be certain that the observed changes can be assigned to the policy that has been implemented rather than to other changes at the societal level or driven by other policies? The short answer is that we cannot be 100% certain of the impact of any given policy on gender transformation. Thus, we shall not neglect the 'What if?' question in assessing the outcomes of a given gender equality polity. What if the observed gender outcome occurred due to processes unrelated to the policy under assessment or in combination with the policy? It is, indeed, very likely that gender transformation will only occur through the systematic implementation of numerous policies that specifically focus on gender and sexual inequalities or integrate a gender component to tackle gender-based hierarchies of power. In addition, gender transformation without gender empowerment is unlikely but can nevertheless occur, at least in theory (Walby, 2007). To tackle the 'What if?' question, drawing on counterfactuals has become a popular approach in policy evaluation for 'with versus without' comparison. When direct group comparison between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries through (quasi-)experimental design is not a feasible or meaningful option, one can either compare policy sectors that have seen the implementation of the policy with sectors that have not within the same country, and/or the same sector across countries, and/or the same sector across time within the same country or across countries.

For example, up until the 1960s in France, women worked in paid labour at much higher rates than in most of continental Europe – in 1950, 49.5% of adult women worked, well above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 38% – and this when few women were active in the policy process and even fewer employment policies, if any, had a gender component (Reddy et al, 1988: 19). Nevertheless, the increasing insertion of women into the labour market did not result in an increase in sharing care activities and household duties. It is thus arguable that long-lasting gender transformation did not fully occur as women simply added paid occupations to their unpaid family care occupation.

## Towards the elusive recipe for gender equality

Taking stock of gender and policy scholarship, we have gone beyond the static macro-quantitative instruments of gender equality measurement to provide an analytical framework that has the potential to allow researchers to open up the black box of gender equality policy implementation. The framework enables the systematic assessment of policy success through the investigation of the policy implementation/evaluation mix, inclusive policy empowerment in practice and gender transformation as the ultimate outcome. Crucially, the adoption of gender equality policies or policy components is only a first step towards the promotion of equality; policy research shows that an often-bumpy road lies ahead through the politics of policy implementation. Many an elegant (on paper) gender equality policy is never implemented, while others get their resources downsized or redirected towards alternative goals at the time of implementation. As a result, the recipe for successful gender equality policy has remained, at best, elusive.

Shifting the focus from the politics of adoption to the politics of implementation in assessing policy success is a crucial and fundamental advance, one that has only recently been taken in the design of comparative policy research. The three analytical components of the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Approach that we have proposed here broaden conventional quantitative measures of gender equality to offer indicators of policy success in terms of the mix of policy instruments, empowerment in implementation and evaluation, results in terms of gender transformation, and sensitivity to the multidimensionality and intersectionality of gender and inequalities. Researchers can now identify a policy decision and trace its trajectory through the three components of the analytical framework to identify the recipe for gender equality success. What was the mix of implementation and evaluation instruments? How was it used in practice? What gender-related actors/advocacy groups came forward in that process? Whose ideas of gender equality were brought forward and what was the overall outcome of that policy in terms of gender equality – neutrality, rowback, accommodation or transformation? This new approach reflects the highly complex nature of post-adoption processes: how policy design can be interwoven with policy implementation and evaluation; the variety of mixes of implementation and evaluation instruments; the politics of gender-related advocacy; the articulation of different visions of gender equality in implementation and evaluation; and the challenge of attributing policy process causality in gender outcomes.

To be sure, we have not identified the exact formula for turning lead into gold, but we have unpacked and mapped the different components of the processes so that scholars can begin the task of the empirical assessment of the dynamics and determinants of successful gender equality policy. It now remains for researchers to apply this new approach and further develop it in an iterative dialogue between conducting actual analyses of policy implementation and returning to the three components of the approach to modify them. Indeed, the members of the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Network have begun this task in several crucial policy sectors of care, employment and political representation across 20-plus countries. This article has hopefully moved the agenda of comparative gender and policy studies forward to take the implementation of gender equality policy seriously and, in so doing, improved upon existing analytical approaches to democratic policy responsiveness and performance.

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Notes

1. Montoya (2013) first used the term 'practice' in a study of policy on violence against women in the European Union.
2. Our thanks go to Joni Lovenduski for her significant contribution to the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Network and to a paper we co-authored with her (Engeli et al, 2015), which serves as an important touchstone for this article.
3. For work on the dynamics and determinants of gendering attention, agenda setting and policy change, see Annesley et al (2015), Abels and Mushaben (2012), Htun and Weldon (2018) and Lombardo et al (2009). On the conditions under which movements and specialised policy machinery influence the adoption of gender-related policies, see Waylen (2007), Banaszack et al (2003), Weldon (2011), McBride and Mazur (2010), Ayoub (2016) and Ayoub and Paternotte (2014). On the importance of framing, see Bacchi (2017), Ferree et al (2002), Verloo (2006), Lombardo et al (2009) and Kantola and Lombardo (2017). On the challenges of gender mainstreaming, see Woodward (2003), Cavaghan (2017) and True and Mintrom (2001). On the gendered nature of institutions, see Waylen (2017) and Krook and Mackay (2011).
4. Opposition and resistances to gender policies are key to understanding the implementation process (Verloo, 2018). Due to space constraint, these will not be developed here.
5. This complexity is captured in our choice of the term gender-based advocacy groups and actors rather than feminist or women's rights groups, movements or actors.

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