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# Contested Gender Equality and Policy Variety in Europe: Introducing a Critical Frame Analysis Approach

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## 1. Introduction

This book aims to map the diversity of meanings of gender equality across Europe and reflects on the contested concept of gender equality. In its exploration of the diverse meanings of gender equality it not only takes into account the existence of different visions of gender equality, and the way in which different political and theoretical debates crosscut these visions, but also reflects upon the geographical contexts in which the visions and debates over gender equality are located. The visions of inclusion, reversal, and displacement set the theoretical background for the emerging of a multiplicity of feminist political debates, of which we have singled out those concerning what is the relation of gender with other inequalities, who has a voice to frame gender issues in the political arena, and how can the political be defined, particularly in relation to the public/private dichotomy.

The contextual locations where these visions and debates take place include the European Union and member states such as Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Slovenia, Greece, and Spain. In all of these settings, the different meanings of gender equality are explored comparatively in relation to the issues of family policies, domestic violence, and gender inequality in politics, while specific national contexts discuss the issues of prostitution (Austria and Slovenia), migration (the Netherlands and Greece), homosexual rights (Spain), and anti-discrimination (Hungary). These were all case studies that were part of the European project MAGEEQ (Policy Frames and Implementation Problems: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming), where research for this book has been conducted.<sup>1</sup>

1. MAGEEQ, funded within the European Commission's Fifth Framework Programme, conducted a three-year (2003–2005) comparative research on the framing of gender inequality as a policy problem in Austria, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and at the European Union level. The main aim of the research was to map the different meanings of gender in/equality in the policy texts of the EU and of a selection of European member states. See online: <http://www.mageeq.net>.

The diversity of meanings of gender equality across Europe is studied here through Critical Frame Analysis, a methodology that originated in social movement theory and that was refined further with elements of gender and political theory within the context of the MAGEEQ research project. This chapter opens the discussion on the contested concept of gender equality by exploring in Part 1 the different visions, debates, and locations previously mentioned. It then analyzes in Part 2 how this diversity of meanings of gender equality is studied in the book, by conceptualizing the theoretical and methodological framework of Critical Frame Analysis. It concludes in Part 3 with a reflection on the potential and pitfalls of the Frame Analysis methodology employed in the book.

## **2. Contested Gender Equality: Different Visions, Debates, and Locations across Europe**

Gender equality is a contested notion. Its contested character is obscured partly by its frequent appearance as a harmonious and a-conflictual concept, either due to a tendency to homogenize diversity under a dominant norm (for instance, that of the European Union) or due to an explicit “strategic framing” of the concept to make it enter more easily into the policy agenda as a common and accepted goal (Verloo 2005a). Nevertheless, the meaning of gender equality always has been highly debated within feminist theory and today, as much as any other time in history, it is capable of generating continuous questions and dilemmas. What is the problem of gender in/equality? What could be a solution to the problem? Should the goal be equality? Or difference? Or diversity? There is little consensus among actors from politics, from civil society, and from academia on what gender equality actually means and should mean. The concept therefore can be seen as an empty signifier that takes as many meanings as the variety of visions and debates on the issue allow it to take. Feminism in fact has been defined as a cluster of contesting views on the gender problematic (Arneil 1999; Verloo 2005b). Similarly, gender equality policies can be studied as clusters of contesting views on addressing the gender problematic.

This book therefore explores the diverse and contested nature of gender equality. It does so by relating to three different levels of analysis: the first concerns the existence of different visions of gender equality; the second focuses on the different political and theoretical debates that arise within the framework of these visions; and the third refers to the different contextual locations in which such visions and debates over gender equality take place in actual policy practices.

## *Visions of Gender Equality*

The variety of feminist traditions or paths to achieve a society free from gender domination and oppression is seen to have articulated at least three main different visions of gender equality, which then can translate into different political strategies (Walby 2005). Gender equality can be conceptualized as a problem of achieving equality as sameness (this is linked to the strategy of equal opportunities), or of affirming difference from the male norm (positive actions fit with this approach, although they are not limited to it), or of transforming all established norms and standards of what is/should be female and male (gender mainstreaming has been considered as a strategy suitable to achieve this) (Rees 1998; Walby 2005; Squires 2005; Verloo 2005a). This variety of visions has also been referred to as “inclusion,” “reversal,” and “displacement,” whereby each of them refers to the principles of equality, difference, and transformation, respectively (Squires 1999; 2005). By providing different conceptual and explanatory frameworks, equality, difference, and transformation seek to respond to the fundamental questions “what is the problem of gender inequality?” and “how could the problem of gender inequality be solved?”

According to the vision of equality as sameness, the problem is that women have been excluded from the political and the solution proposed is to include them in the world as it is, without challenging the underlying male norm. The idea is that each individual, irrespective of gender, should have access to the rights and opportunities enjoyed by men and should be treated according to the same principles, norms, and standards. However, this feminist route is criticized for not directly challenging dominant patriarchal values. It aspires to a gender-neutral world in which women are treated as if they were equal to men and is commonly linked to the liberal tradition of feminism (Squires 1999; Verloo 2005a).

In contrast, the approach of difference or reversal rather problematizes the existence of an unquestioned male norm that women must either imitate or be compensated for not attaining (Mackinnon 1987). The proposed solution then is seen to reconstruct the political by seeking recognition of (women’s) non-hegemonic gendered identities that have been treated as different in comparison to male normative identities and cultures. The notion of positive actions, which recommends to take gender into account in establishing the criteria for employment, promotions, and participation in decision-making institutions (and favoring, in cases of equal merit, a woman over a man), originates from this theoretical approach. This vision frequently is associated with radical and cultural feminists (Squires 1999; Verloo 2005a; Ferguson 1993).

In the vision of transformation or displacement, more typical of postmodern feminists, it is the gendered world itself that is problematized, not only the exclu-

sion of women or the existence of a male norm. The proposed solution is to move beyond the fictitious dilemma of equality versus difference by deconstructing political discourses that engender the subject and by adopting diversity politics. This transformative vision of gender equality is, according to Squires (2005), particularly apt for conceptualizing the strategy of gender mainstreaming. This is due to the fact that its changing character makes it particularly suitable to embrace the challenge of incorporating gender into the mainstream, a process that implies the continuous questioning of established categories and meanings both in the mainstream and in gender theory. In order for displacement to be a politically feasible strategy, Verloo (2005a) recommends to link the emphasis on diversity and displacement with the aspect of empowerment, which would be based on the opening of public spaces for the expression of ongoing feminist political debates over the meanings of gender equality. Mainstreaming gender in all policy areas also would require, according to Walby, the need to take into account the complex interaction between different gender regimes and policy areas by considering the specificity of each domain with its particular institutions and gender equality politics and policies “to understand whether changes in one domain are likely, ultimately, to have implications for other domains” (Walby 2005: 328; 2004).

Within the framework of these theoretical visions of gender equality, a variety of different political debates take place. These offer continuous challenges to the concept of gender equality and contribute to make it even more a site of “productive” contestation and conflict (Walby 2005; Verloo 2005a). Without pretending to encompass the multiple and varied panorama of current political discussions over gender equality, this book will try to contribute to three different feminist debates: gender and intersectionality; voice or the tension between “expertise” and “democracy”; and the definition of the political, especially the public/private dichotomy.

*Political and Theoretical Debates on Gender Equality:  
Gender and Other Inequalities*

A first debate concerns the intersection of gender with other inequalities. Contemporary feminist scholars are more aware of the risks of essentialism and homogenization that are present within the feminist movement, thanks to the theorization of differences among women that are due to race, class, age, sexual orientation, ethnic origins, ability, and other complex inequalities (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1990; Harris 1991; Lorde 1984; Nussbaum 2000). In this debate, the benefits of acknowledging the plurality of women’s experiences for strengthening the common and, at the same time, diverse struggles for social justice are counterbalanced by wor-

ries about the possible loss of attention and resources on gender that instead would be redirected to a multiplicity of social collectives (Woodward 2005; Squires 2005). At the core of the discussion is the problem of how to frame gender equality in the context of the multiple differences and inequalities that exist among women. The current state of political and theoretical debates seems to be that there is a wide acknowledgement of the relevance of intersectionality to (gender) equality policymaking, but that there is little development of policy practice other than anti-discrimination legislation (Verloo 2006; Bell 2004).

The question of intersectionality steers the debate towards more complex ways of thinking and treating gender and other inequalities by suggesting the need to overcome a simple bipolar logic of analysis that treats one type of inequality as compared to another, taking what appears as the dominant one as the norm for comparison, instead of focusing on the point at which the various inequalities of race, gender, class, etc., intersect with each other (Crenshaw 1989). Next to *structural intersectionality* (inequalities and their intersections as relevant at the level of experiences of people), Crenshaw refers to *political intersectionality* to indicate how inequalities and their intersections are relevant at the level of political strategies. Political differences are most relevant here, as strategies on one axis of inequality are mostly not neutral towards other axes. Crucial questions to analyze political intersectionality are: how and where is feminism marginalizing ethnic minorities or disabled women? How and where are measures on sexual equality or on racism marginalizing women? How and where are gender equality policies marginalizing lesbians?

While the concept is widely used in academic studies, there is criticism that intersectionality remains unclear as a model for understanding structures (Beisel and Kay 2005). The attention is mostly on the level of different experiences of various categories of women. As yet there are no studies that analyze if all the possible intersections might be relevant at all times or when and where some of them might be most salient. The few solutions suggested so far could lie in exploring measures that will enable a legal recognition of differences that takes intersectionality into account (Young 1990). Another way of tackling the complex “move to consider equality and diversity rather than simply gender equality” is, according to Squires (2005: 382), to engage in a process of democratic deliberation among diverse social groups who bring to the public agenda their respective views and experiences. The risk, however, is to encourage an identity politics that could freeze group identities, undermine solidarity among diverse collectives, and foster coerciveness within group participants.

Overall, very little attention is paid to both structural and political intersectionality in policymaking. There is some reference to *structural intersectionality* in feminism and in gender equality policies, and also to some extent in movements and policies against racism. It is striking, though, that there is almost no reference to the concept

of *political intersectionality*. One exception is Sainsbury's analysis of the contribution of "intersecting struggles of recognition" to the surprising victory of the women's suffrage campaign in Oklahoma in 1918 (Sainsbury 2003).

The debate on the relationship between gender equality and other inequalities, while clearly extremely relevant, seems to be still at an embryonic stage when it comes to policymaking.

*Political and Theoretical Debates on Gender Equality:  
Who Has a Voice in Gender Equality Policies? A Second Debate*

A second issue that crosscuts the conceptualizations of gender in/equality concerns the question of who has/should have a voice in the political debate to say what is gender equality and how could the problem of gender inequality be solved. In academic literature the focus has been mostly on the tension between "expertise" and "democracy," an issue that has become even more evident in the context of the implementation of gender mainstreaming (Beveridge et al. 2000; Walby 2005; Verloo 2005a). On one side stands the idea of gender equality policy as a political process of democratization in which women's voices are included in the policymaking process (Walby 2005). On the other side gender equality policy (and gender mainstreaming in particular) increasingly is presented and organized as a technical process that politicians and bureaucrats should carry out, occasionally with the consultation of gender experts.

Gender expertise is an important element for progressing in gender equality policies, both because policymaking is informed by gendered knowledge and because policy actors who share a higher gender awareness are more likely to effectively implement gender equality policies (Beveridge and Nott 2002; Verloo 2001; Walby 2005). However, the risks involved in the treatment of gender policy measures by technocrats have to do with the potential "depoliticization" of the issue of gender inequality altogether (Squires 1999; 2005). This could result both from the presentation of gender equality measures as technical procedures that include no political conflict and contestation, and from the exclusion of more radical feminist voices from the policymaking process (Squires 2005 and Verloo 2005a). A further aspect of the technocratic approach to gender equality policy that causes problems for democracy is the extent to which women's wider concerns that are not part of the experts' experiences might come to the fore only in a limited consultation.

While this duality of directions is used to describe and criticize a signalled "technocratization" of gender mainstreaming, it also has been criticized as a false dichotomy (Walby 2005). In some cases, the two sides do not necessarily oppose one

another as much as reveal the political experiences of the formation of “velvet triangles” among femocrats, academics, and the feminist movement (Woodward 2004). These include, for example, Northern Ireland’s “participatory-democratic” approach to mainstreaming, based on the participation of civic groups in the policymaking process through consultations and hearings (Barnett-Donaghy 2003), and practices like the UK Women’s Budget Group,<sup>2</sup> in which a union of academics, civil society, and policymakers has contributed to progress in the gendering of the government budget (Walby 2005). These examples also point at some problems connected to more democratic approaches to gender mainstreaming, such as questions of resources and timing especially (Donaghy 2003).

Contemporary struggles for recognition (Taylor 1992; Fraser 1997; and Young 1990, 1997) and political voice (Phillips 1998, 2003; Lister 2005) show how important it is for excluded policy actors to gain access to the definition of the public debate in order to have influence on the formation of public policy. The right to have a voice in the framing of a policy issue is connected strictly to matters of power, and related to the actual inclusion or exclusion of actors in/from the political debate (Phillips 2003; Marx Ferree and Gamson 2003; and Lister 2005). According to Fraser (1989, 1997), existing hegemonization can be challenged only if there is some space for “subaltern or non-hegemonic counterpublics” to participate in the debate. Otherwise, participation processes under the condition of inequality will tend to serve dominant groups and exclude subordinated groups from the opportunity to articulate their interests. Similarly, Benhabib (1992) argues that since the present public space does not encourage the development of democratic participatory structures of collective discussion and political activism, it is unlikely that the inclusion of more women in such a poor public space will make any considerable change. In such a context women will not be able to participate effectively in the public arena or contribute to the democratization of society.<sup>3</sup> Thus, she calls feminists’ attention to the need for creating a critical theory of the public space, in order to reframe both the private and public spheres.

The result of these struggles for, and debates on, political voice is a continuous re-defining of the borders of “gender equality” as a concept. However, the debate on who has/should have voice in policymaking seems to remain largely at a normative level, while empirical evidence is still scarce. It also seems to be in danger of (re)creating

2. UK Women’s Budget Group. Online: <http://www.wbg.org.uk>.

3. Benhabib shares Habermas’ definition of public space as the locus for collective debate and political participation. See Habermas (1962).



dichotomies that are unproductive, such as the division between “experts” and “civil society,” who can also engage in constructive alliances rather than oppositions.

*Political and Theoretical Debates on Gender Equality:  
Defining the Political: The Public/Private Dichotomy*

In the background of debates on gender in/equality frequently lies the fundamental issue of the definition of the political, and especially the feminist critique of the gendered public/private dichotomy underlying much of the borders of politics (Pateman 1987 and Okin 1991). Feminist actors have struggled in favor of a broader definition of “political” that includes all the so-called “private” and “personal” issues, such as violence against women, reproductive rights, and the sharing of care work between the sexes, which were traditionally excluded from the public sphere. In this classical feminist debate, the two spheres are considered as deeply interrelated because neither the intimate and domestic areas nor the non-domestic, political world can be understood separately, due to the role of each domain in supporting and maintaining the other. Moreover, the so-called “private sphere” is seen as political because problems that are labelled “personal” in fact are regulated by the state and are caused by, perpetuated, or solved through political means (Olsen 1985).

The public/private division is a key dimension of the conceptualizations of the main structures that contribute to maintain and reproduce gender inequality, such as the organization of labor, intimacy, and citizenship.<sup>4</sup> These interconnected structures consist of the norms, values, institutions, and organizations that reproduce gender inequality in each of the three spheres. The division of labor is related to the public/private dichotomy because the existing divisions between labor and care, and between paid and unpaid work, are based on a hierarchy between men and women that places women in a subordinate position. This is reflected in the fact that women as a group have lower positions in labor than men, work in sectors that are paid less, and perform most of the unpaid work of care. The latter makes possible the system of paid labor, currently dominated by men. In this division of work, care is not seen as a collective responsibility of men and women, or of the whole of society, but as an individual responsibility of women. Employment and budget policies can maintain or challenge this division of labor, depending on factors such as the value they attribute to the unpaid work of care or the extent to which they encourage and facilitate the

4. This three-folded typology was elaborated by the MAGEEQ project on the basis of the work of Walby (1990), Connell (1987; 1995), and the Dutch Gender Impact Assessment theorized by Verloo and Roggeband (1996).

equal sharing between women and men of paid-productive and unpaid-reproductive work (Phillips 1991; Okin 1989; Budlender et al. 2002; and Villagómez 2004).

In the organization of intimacy, concerning the norms, values, institutions, and organizations regulating sexuality, reproduction, and private and family life, men and women are seen as two different kinds of people who are supposed to be sexually dependent upon each other, i.e., heterosexual identities are assumed and socialized. These identities are shaped by existing norms and values on masculinity and femininity. Female sexuality is either invisible or understood as a derivation of male sexuality. The organization of private life and the relations with children are permeated by traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, resulting in unequal positions of men and women in private life. Family policies and domestic violence are two of the policy issues that can be linked to the organization of intimacy. The effects of these policies on the public and private gender roles vary according to the different ways in which problems are represented. There is debate, for instance, on the role of family policies in either promoting a shared responsibility for care work between women and men or reinforcing the traditional perception that women's main role should be within the private sphere of the family. Domestic violence can be treated as a public or private problem depending, for example, on the type of state involvement in the issue, the priority accorded to it, or the extent to which policies effectively target (male) perpetrators and the structural causes of violence. Furthermore, policies can have different effects depending on the connections existing between violence against women or family policies and gender equality as a goal (Kantola 2006; Lombardo and Meier 2006; and Stratigaki 2004).

In the current organization of citizenship, there exists a hierarchy between women and men as concerns the enjoyment of the main civil, political, and social rights. Gender and ethnicity are not considered among the classic elements of political citizenship, such as voting and active participation and representation in political institutions, nor are they included in the definition of who can be a citizen and under what conditions, who is supposed to give "his" [*sic*] life for the country or what specific contribution to a society is expected, and who can expect protection and security against which kinds of violence or hardship. A number of debates take place on the obstacles to women's representation in the "public sphere" of politics, on the strategies to foster it, and on the role of state measures in tackling or not tackling issues of the so-called "private sphere" (e.g., time devoted to care and reproduction, mainly by women) that could enable such participation (Phillips 1995, 1998; Bashevkin 1985; Stetson and Mazur 1995; and Lovenduski and Norris 1993). The gender bias present in the public sphere of politics itself also is singled out as a major obstacle to women's political representation, with attitudes and practices of discrimination against women and institutional sexism occurring in the main political parties (Lovenduski 2005).

The debate on the definition of the political can be seen as highlighting the importance of looking at what is not seen as part of gender equality policies, and the relevance of the various ways gender equality policies construct gender equality in relation to the three mentioned structures.

### *Contextualizing Gender Equality Policies*

The models of gender equality and political debates that we have discussed so far can be found in different national contexts. In these settings is where visions of gender equality like inclusion, reversal, or displacement meet with the wider multiplicity of gender political debates, such as those on intersectionality, voice, the public/private division, and many more, to generate different ways of representing gender in/equality as a policy problem and different solutions to the problem. Only in Europe does the variety of conceptualizations of gender equality go from framing prostitution as a job in the Netherlands and as a crime in Sweden (Outshoorn 2001), to creating houses for battered women in Spain and expelling the perpetrator from his home in Austria (Logar 2000). Thus, the third level of analysis that we consider in the discussion of gender equality as a contested concept focuses on the way in which this diversity of visions and debates on gender equality is articulated across various geographical locations. Different national political contexts may, in fact, affect the framing of gender in/equality due to the influence of specific cultural and political histories and ideologies (Verloo 2005b). Gender debates within Europe have already presented ideological cleavages along the North-South axis, but an enlarged European Union could be confronted with another divide between East-West in the way of framing gender in/equality problems (Jalušič 2001; Havelkova 1998; and Verloo 2005b).

However, in the absence of tested typologies of gender equality regimes, and given the highly dynamic character of gender equality policies as a supranational phenomenon (an example are the numerous activities of the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank, the International Labour Organization, and many other transnational organizations), overgeneralizations concerning the existence of North-South, East-West shifts and gaps in the representation of gender in/equality should be avoided in the analysis of gender equality across Europe in order to not to fall into the trap of stereotypical assumptions about more or less women-friendly states. Any analysis of the diversity in the framing of gender in/equality as a policy problem in Europe should aim at grasping the nuances and eventual inconsistencies of policy discourses, rather than over-simplifying conclusions about this or that concept of gender equality. Moreover, countries may share similarities in the framing of a certain policy issue and present differences in another,

as each issue has a different institutional and political history (Walby 2005), and may have been influenced by a different range of policy actors, with different results.

In order to capture this diversity in the framing of gender in/equality in Europe, the contributors to this book aim at mapping the different meanings of the concept of gender equality across a range of European countries, covering the northwest, the east and the south of Europe: Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Slovenia, Greece, and Spain. In the context of these countries, the case of the European Union also needs to be considered, as it is interesting to see what role does the EU play as a self-defined norm-setter (Luxembourg Presidency 2005) in the context of a Europe where competing notions of gender equality are articulated by policy actors in the different member states. The different meanings that gender equality takes across Europe will be discussed in this book in relation to the issues of family policies, domestic violence, gender inequality in politics, prostitution, homosexual rights, anti-discrimination, and migration. These issues, which belong to two of the structures that reproduce gender inequality, i.e., the organization of intimacy and citizenship, reflect either the most debated issues that the EU shares with the six mentioned countries (family policies, domestic violence, and gender inequality in politics) or highly debated issues specific to the national contexts considered (prostitution in Austria and Slovenia, migration in the Netherlands, homosexual rights in Spain, and anti-discrimination in Hungary).

### **3. Gender Equality in Europe: A Critical Frame Analysis Approach**

Since gender equality is such a contested concept and so many visions and debates take place in different national contexts, this variety calls to be studied, if only to understand what is meant by “gender equality” in Europe’s policy practice. But how to study this diversity? Where to look? And how to sharpen the analysis in order to grasp all the nuances of a complex concept such as that of “gender equality?” What interpretative tools could be developed to enable distinctions between different meanings that are commonly pooled under the general and open concept of “gender equality?” Critical Frame Analysis, the approach adopted in this book, provides the theoretical and methodological framework for studying this diversity within the concept of gender equality through an in-depth analysis of the different dimensions of a policy discourse.

Frame analysis starts from the assumption of multiple interpretations in policy-making and seeks to address such implicit or explicit interpretations, in this case, the concept of gender equality, by focusing on the different representations that socio-political actors offer about the problem of gender inequality and about the solutions

to the latter. The type of frame analysis that is employed in this book has been built upon theoretical notions developed by social movement theory (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow et al. 1986; and Tarrow 1992, 1998), public policy (Bacchi 1999 and Giddens 1984), and gender theory (Walby 1990, 1997; Verloo and Roggeband 1996; and Connell 1987), and has been further developed within the MAGEEQ project, where research for this book has been carried out.

At a theoretical level, the key concept of critical frame analysis is that of a “policy frame.” A frame usually is described as an interpretation scheme that structures the meaning of reality (Goffmann 1974). This conceptual schema is not to be understood as intentional in the subject’s way of representing reality (Bacchi 2005). Using a distinction made by Giddens (1984), policy frames originate in discursive consciousness, to the extent that actors using them can explain discursively why they are using them and what they mean to them, but they also originate in the practical consciousness, to the extent that they originate in routines and rules that commonly are applied in certain contexts without an awareness that these are indeed rules or routines, and that they could have been different. Discursive or practical, either way policy frames have concrete and material consequences that set the conditions for future actions and realities.

Gadamer also nicely explains it when he argues that our understanding of reality is always filtered through “prejudices,” which, unlike the common negative meaning of the term, he defines as our “conditions for understanding.” Gadamerian “prejudices” are the socially constructed and cultural filters through which we perceive, understand, and give meaning to reality (Gadamer 1960). These “prejudices” can shift our attention towards certain aspects of social reality, where our socio-cultural biases mostly lead us, while at the same time they can make us neglect others. As a result, actors may provide a representation of a given policy problem that is more gender-, or race-biased than they actually wished.

However, the fact that the representation of reality is embedded in the conceptual schemas through which we understand the world, does not necessarily make actors passive reproducers of cultural discourses. In fact, an increased awareness of conceptual “prejudices” can help foster a positive critical attitude towards reality that could enable a critical distance to our own pre-assumptions. As Gadamer wrote concerning the relation between “prejudices” and textual interpretation, “it is those prejudices of which we are not aware that make us deaf to the voice of a text” (1983: 317). The efforts of critical frame analysis go precisely in the direction of exposing the frames that operate in the policy texts on gender equality in order to avoid any inconsistencies at the level of policy formulation or to facilitate political debates.

Conceptual frames that shape the understanding of reality also exist in relation to the policy process under the name “policy frames.” Verloo defines a “policy frame” as

an “organising principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included” (Verloo 2005b: 20). This definition refers to the various dimensions in which a given policy problem can be represented.

In the previous section, we discussed the existence of at least three different visions that offer different representations of gender inequality as a policy problem. In particular, the approaches of equality, reversal, and displacement differently construct the two key dimensions of a policy frame: the “diagnosis” (what is the problem?) and the “prognosis” of a problem (what is the solution?). For instance, the diagnosis of the problem of gender inequality is, for the vision of equality, the exclusion of women from the political; for the vision of reversal, the existence of a male norm; and for the vision of displacement, the gendered world itself. The three models diverge again in the prognosis of the problem they suggest, as the vision of equality represents the inclusion of women in the existing world as a possible solution, while the vision of reversal constructs a solution that challenges the existing male norm by incorporating women’s perspectives in the definition of the political, and the vision of displacement proposes to deconstruct political discourses that engender the subject.

Furthermore, the three theoretical visions of gender equality conceptualize and treat the dimension of “gender” in different ways. The model of equality tends to assume gender-neutrality and to treat women as if they were equal to men. The vision of reversal, instead, argues that gender-neutrality reflects, in fact, the dominant male perspectives and that women’s difference from men needs to be recognized and valorized. Finally, the vision of displacement challenges the category of “gender” altogether, for being based on a fixed dichotomy that contributes to generate further inequalities, and it proposes a diversity politics as an alternative to both equality and difference. The dimension of “gender” then is singled out as another key element of a policy frame. By questioning the gender dimension of policy discourses it is possible to detect whether and how the latter address the complex and multilayered phenomenon of gender.

If the visions of gender equality center around “diagnosis,” “prognosis,” and “gender,” then the political and theoretical debates on gender equality discussed in the first section also conceptualize other relevant dimensions of a policy frame. The debate on the relationship between gender and other inequalities, which focuses on the dimension of “intersectionality,” reveals that, despite its relevance, the attention that policymakers devote to it is extremely limited. Thus, it appears necessary to tackle “intersectionality” in the structure of a policy frame by questioning the extent to which policy discourses represent any other structural inequalities beyond gender (class, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality, etc.) as part of the diagnosis and prognosis of the problem of gender inequality.

The debate concerning a supposed dichotomy between “expertise” and “democracy” has contributed to highlight the relevance of the dimension of “voice” in policy discourses (Walby 2005). The emphasis on voice originates from emergent scholarly debates about recognition and the legitimate right to have a voice in the political arena as basic elements of social justice, together with redistribution. It appears relevant then to include within the dimensions that characterize a policy frame the question of who has/should have a voice in the political debate to say what is gender equality and how the problem of gender inequality could be solved. The inclusion of voice in the dimensions of a policy frame adds a “critical” feature to the “frame analysis” methodology that is applied in this book. It facilitates an analysis in terms of inclusion/exclusion and power that enables the identification of which voices (perspectives and experiences) are more regularly included or excluded from the possibility of framing policy problems and solutions in official texts.

Policy discourses tend, implicitly or explicitly, to attribute different roles to different actors. Representations vary with respect to who is seen to be holding the problem of gender inequality, and who, if there is a problem group, is seen to be the norm group of reference that enables the definition of the other group as problematic. For instance, if we take the problem of gender violence, whose problem is it seen to be? Is it women’s? Men’s? Society’s? The same goes for other issues. Is reconciliation between work and family framed as a problem for men or for women? Is gender inequality in politics represented as a men’s problem or do women appear as the main problem-holders? And who are the target groups of the proposed actions? Dimensions such as “roles in diagnosis” (Whose problem is it seen to be? What is a norm group if there is a problem group?) and “roles in prognosis” (Who should [not] do something to solve the problem? Who are the target groups of the actions?) appear as relevant to characterize a policy frame.

The broad public/private debate has been at the basis of theorizations of the three main structures that reproduce gender inequality. This debate has suggested to incorporate in the configuration of a policy frame the dimensions of “location” and “mechanisms” that allow a deeper analysis of what are the main structures in which gender inequality is seen to be located, and what are the main mechanisms that are seen to maintain and reproduce gender inequalities. The dimension of structures allow us to focus on “where” the problem and solution are located, whether in the organization of labor, intimacy, or citizenship. For instance, it makes a difference to locate the problem of “reconciliation of family and work” either within the organization of labor or in that of intimacy, since the problem may be represented, in the former, as a labor market need to have flexible (female) workers who should be able to “combine” work and family or, in the latter, as a problem of women’s inequality due to the work that is required of them both in the (unpaid) reproductive and productive spheres, a



burden that is not generally imposed on men. The dimension of “mechanisms” helps us focus on “how” the problem of gender inequality is maintained and reproduced and how it should be solved. The question asked is whether the text draws a representation of the problem along material lines (through the access and redistribution of resources) or along discursive lines (through the attribution of legal and/or cultural norms and interpretations) or through the use or legitimization of violence.

As exemplified in the aforementioned theoretical and political debates, many different interpretations can make their way into the construction of policy problems (Bacchi 1999). For instance, gender inequality in politics can be represented as a problem of “women lagging behind men” or of “men dominating power positions and excluding women.” These different ways of framing the problem can generate completely different solutions. Theoretically, prognosis should correspond to diagnosis, so that solutions are adapted to the problems posed. As in the previous example, a coherent solution to the problem of male domination could be, for instance, to introduce measures that challenge male domination in power by requiring change from male politicians, while a less consistent solution would be to ask only women to change (that would rather be more consistent with the diagnosis of “women lagging behind men”). Frame analysis can help the researcher to assess whether or not this correspondence between the diagnosis of a problem and the prognosis or solution to it actually occurs in a policy text, through the introduction of the dimension of “balance” that facilitates the detection of inconsistencies within a given policy frame.

Diagnosis and prognosis, voice, roles in diagnosis and in prognosis, gender and intersectionality, location, mechanisms, and balance between the different parts of a policy text are among the dimensions that structure a policy frame. These and other elements were included in a list of “sensitizing questions,” the methodological tool elaborated by the MAGEEQ research team and employed in the analysis of policy texts in order to detect the different aspects of a policy frame. The content of the “sensitizing questions” builds upon issues that are highly present in the current feminist debates, such as, the meaning of gender, the treatment of intersectionality, the inclusion of voice, or the structures reproducing gender inequalities. Policy documents are analyzed on the basis of the “sensitizing questions” by assigning codes to each dimension of the text.<sup>5</sup> Diagnosis, prognosis, and the other dimensions of policy documents are organized around the structure of the “sensitizing

5. Frame analysis employs elements from grounded theory, a methodology that includes the analysis of words and sentences regularly repeated along the text, of words in their context, of dimensions of ideas implicit in the texts, and of how ideas are organized in different positions within these dimensions (Strauss and Corbin 1990).



questions” in a systematic and detailed summary that has been called the “supertext” (Annex 1).<sup>6</sup> Selected documents, thus, undergo an in-depth analysis whose results disclose the different dimensions of a policy frame according to the criteria established in the “sensitizing questions.”<sup>7</sup>

Three of the issues in this book, family policies, domestic violence, and gender inequality in politics, are approached through a comparative perspective.<sup>8</sup> Comparative analysis enabled us to form a comprehensive idea of the different meanings of gender equality as they appeared in the policy frames identified in the different member states and in the EU. The idea behind the comparison was not to single out the best national practice, but to have an overview of the variety of ways in which gender equality is framed in Europe. In order to present this variety, the chapters in this book will adopt a distinction between major and minor frames<sup>9</sup> that is by no means a strict criteria but rather a way of presenting the data on member states and EU policy frames on gender equality. The comparative study helps to detect policy frames that are absent in one national context but that may appear in other member states. This favors a reflection that is in line with Bacchi’s “what’s the problem?” approach concerning the importance of focusing not only “upon the representations of those issues that reach the political agenda,” but also upon “what does not get problematised” (Bacchi 1999: 36). The identification of absences in the policy discourse adds yet another element towards a critical analysis of frames, due to the implications it has in terms of power. According to Lukes’ “radical view” (2005), one of the levels at

6. Diametrically opposed to the concept of “subtext,” a “supertext” enables the hidden significance of a text to be made explicit according to the dimensions listed in the “sensitizing questions.”

7. The database of “supertexts” produced by the MAGEEQ project includes a total of 366 texts for the three comparative issues that were common to the EU and the six national cases (Austria, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Hungary, Greece, and Spain), i.e., family policies, domestic violence, and gender inequality in politics.

8. The format of a “supertext” is such that it makes possible for anyone who is familiar with the theory and concepts used (and with the English language) to read and understand the texts. This allowed the comparison of texts whose originals are in six different languages.

9. The criteria employed in MAGEEQ, to distinguish the major or most important frames from the minor and more fragmented frames, are: the occurrence of a frame (i.e., most frequent frames), not calculated on the basis of numerical frequency of words in the texts but on the researchers’ perception of the occurrence of certain concepts across the supertexts; the comprehensiveness of a frame (i.e., the extent to which it incorporates many aspects of a problem, the complexity of a frame), that does not necessarily imply the consistency of a frame; and the innovativeness (i.e., the extent to which frames introduce something new). These criteria do not need to be present at the same time; in fact, a frame can be presented as major without being innovative, only due to the fact that it is comprehensive or that it occurs more often in the texts.

which power operates is precisely the situation in which an issue is unquestioned to the extent that it is not even formulated in the actors' minds nor openly discussed in political debates.

The period of study covered in this book goes from 1995, the date of the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing that represents a milestone in governments' formal commitment towards mainstreaming gender equality in the policy process, to 2004. The chapters are based on the analysis of a selection of texts that include primarily official documents declaring policies on gender equality elaborated by the main political and administrative institutions (a list of analyzed texts is included in the annex at the end of most chapters). The selection of documents was based on the construction of a timeline that identified key moments that stimulated debates among different socio-political actors in each of the selected issues throughout the period of study. Starting from these key moments, texts were added until they did not include any new substantial information. The type of texts varies in accordance to the instruments privileged in the formulation of equality policies within the specific national and EU contexts, but they usually include legislative texts, political plans and programs, parliamentary debates, and political speeches and declarations. An additional source of texts for analysis was the media, i.e., written press, useful in grasping other types of public interventions. Finally, the selection included, to a lesser extent, texts originating within the feminist movement and from gender experts, as a contrast.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Critical Frame Analysis Methodology: Potential and Pitfalls

Critical frame analysis appears particularly suited for the study of the diversity of meanings of gender equality in policy practice across Europe, as the purpose of this methodology is precisely that of mapping the different ways in which an issue is framed. The relevance of this approach, however, does not consist in the identification of major and minor frames, but most of all in the possibility of grasping the nuances of a policy frame. This is achieved through an in-depth, detailed analysis of the different dimensions within a specific frame.

One of the potentials of critical frame analysis is that it exposes the "conceptual prejudices" that unintentionally may shape policy discourses; consequently, it can

10. The smaller number of feminist and expert texts selected within MAGEEQ was due to the decision to focus the research on the analysis of official documents presenting the position of political institutions on gender in/equality.

reveal latent inconsistencies, or even gender bias, embedded in the design of public policies. Reading a text through the lenses of the “sensitizing questions” can help us sharpen our way of looking at policy discourses and, as a result, it improves our capacity to detect the inconsistency of the latter. Even policy discourses originating in feminist actors, once read through the critical frame analysis methodology, may reveal the presence of sexist prejudices such as the attribution of the problem of reconciliation, political inequality, or domestic violence to women only, while silencing the role of men in all of them. The in-depth analysis of frames is also particularly helpful in challenging generalizations about East-West and North-South divides in the formulation of gender equality policies, and in revealing differences in the way in which specific issues are framed within each national context, making cross-issue comparisons extremely fruitful, so far at a preliminary stage in this book.

Furthermore, this methodology enables the researcher to give visibility to processes of exclusions that exist in the formulation of policy discourses, as it can help to identify how, within the policymaking process, particular “discursive strategies can modify the process itself by means of excluding some actors from the debate” (Triandafyllidou and Fotiou 1998: 6.4). This is because policy frames operating both explicitly and implicitly in the discourse of policy actors drive the latter to select and focus attention on certain issues, arguments, and actors, while at the same time ignoring or marginalizing others. The awareness of inconsistencies and exclusions in policy discourses can be a powerful tool for both sharpening the formulation of gender policies and minimizing processes of exclusion.

The frame analysis approach adopted in this study is both constructionist and deconstructionist. It starts from the basis that policy problems are constructed, that there exist competing interpretations of what is the problem, and that policy solutions are in-built in the representation of the problem (Bacchi 1999). However, to map the different representations of gender in/equality as a policy problem, it adopts a deconstructionist paradigm at least on three occasions. Firstly, when it refuses to define “gender equality” in the first place, leaving it as an open concept that can be filled with a multitude of meanings. Secondly, when it establishes criteria for the analysis of policy texts, namely the “sensitizing questions,” which are “relative” rather than “absolute norms” (Bustelo 2003). Although they are normative assessment criteria, with all their ideological and political implications, they are not absolute models of reference fixed once and for all, but are rather open to periodical revision and transformation in order to better adapt both to the variegated nature of policy texts and to the changes in the researchers’ theoretical perspectives. Thirdly, it does not close the possibilities of coding ahead of the analysis; thus it grants more freedom and flexibility for interpreting the specific variations of a text. Consequently, this approach has more chances to capture unexpected and inconsistent elements of frames

that could be left out from the use of a pre-established coding template. The other side of the coin is that this open-endedness of the coding template creates problems for comparisons, as there are no common codes agreed in advance and the subjective interpretation of codes favors the multiplication of synonymous ways of coding, thus generating potential confusions and delays in the comparative analysis.

Both the constructionist and deconstructionist approaches are combined in a reflexive methodology that seeks to adopt a flexible attitude based on a periodical revision of the categories that have been constructed previously. The construction of a common language, based on the criteria for analysis and the often-implicit understanding of the different styles of text-coding, is necessary to progress in the analysis. However, a deconstructionist approach helps researchers to continuously challenge and problematize their own analytical categories, which, precisely for being constructed, are provisional and leave room for transformation. This “theoretical flexibility,”<sup>11</sup> typical of the vision of displacement, is what enables us researchers to be more aware of our own frames, by taking distance from the categories we have constructed ourselves, metaphorically laughing at them, in order to dismantle and reconstruct them. In the practice of the MAGEEQ project, this reflective methodology meant that, after the first round of frame analysis of texts, there have been different stages and processes of the revision of codes. These led to a clarification of the “sensitizing questions” by, for instance, explicitly coding “absences” in the policy discourse or sharpening the coding of the dimension of gender, and to a second reading of all analyzed material on the basis of the new coding template. This approach appeared useful to work with such a contested concept in continuous transformation like gender equality.

The reflexive character of this methodology, however, is questioned both with respect to the more or less implicit frames we researchers have to measure other people’s interpretations of gender equality (Bacchi 2005 and Rönnblom 2005) and the use of comparative methodology (Rönnblom 2005). With respect to “reflexive framing,” the type of critical frame analysis employed in this study does not explore presuppositions that ground our own problem representation. Rönnblom (2005) suggests to explicitly place ourselves within one feminist tradition and use the language that is usually adopted in that context. However, although we are aware that we have certain political perspectives, we have chosen not to assume a particular position beforehand and to avoid the risk of closing down the variety of existing options and of prioritizing more articulated political positions over less articulated ones (Verloo

11. Thanks to Maria Bustelo for the concept of “theoretical flexibility” and to Elin Peterson and Raquel Platero for an insightful brainstorming session on critical frame analysis methodology.

and Pantelidou 2005). A second criticism concerns the coherence of a supposedly constructionist and reflexive methodology that analyzes the detailed dimensions of policy frames and then turns towards a positivist paradigm of comparative politics, looking for similarities and differences in frames (Rönneblom 2005). Comparison is treated in this frame analysis methodology as an element of contrast, in order to detect absences in the policy discourse by comparing with other cases, and as a way of reflecting on the variety of ways of framing gender equality, rather than to establish a hierarchy of typologies. However, critical frame analysis has not resolved the tensions of a methodology that aspires at frame reflexivity, but does not deal with its own frames and has not articulated a more reflexive way of comparing, different from the positivist tradition of comparative politics yet.

A clear limitation of this methodology is that, although it can be helpful in mapping policy discourses on gender in/equality, it is not equally useful for understanding why the existing frames have emerged in the form in which they appear to the researcher. For this aim, other explanatory approaches are required, such as those researching what is the political context in which certain discourses emerged, which actors elaborated them, how other actors have been excluded, and under which conditions some discourses became more dominant than others. In particular, the literature on political opportunities structures, on state feminism and changes in the gender machinery, and on the relationship between the women's movement and state feminism can provide explanatory insights (see Stetson and Mazur 1995).<sup>12</sup> Interviews with key actors involved in the formulation and adoption of official documents on gender equality also would be useful to complement the analysis.

A final limitation to which we wish to pay attention is the influence of subjective interpretation and coding on the obtained data and how this could affect the reliability of comparative results. Questions can be raised as to how does a researcher know s/he is answering to what the text says or to what s/he thinks the text is saying. In other words, how can one avoid subjective interpretation and individual ways of analyzing a text that will affect the results so that a policy issue in a given country appears framed in a way that does not correspond to reality? Although questions concerning the role of the researcher in biasing results are difficult to answer, and the literature on hermeneutics and epistemology warns us of the impossibility for the subject of situating her or himself out of the circle of interpretation (Gadamer 1960 and Harding 1991), a possible way of minimizing these problems is to contrast interpretations with the context in which the documents originated. In the cross-reading of codes conducted during the process of analysis, we have introduced "multiple eyes"

12. This type of analysis will be further developed by the QUING European project. For more information, please see online: <http://www.quing.eu>.

so that at least two people were checking the selected codes. This raised discussions about why a code was employed in one country and not in another, which helped to minimize the problem of not employing “multiple eyes” methods to cross-check the relation between codes and texts.

Despite its limitations, critical frame analysis has great potential as a methodology able to grasp the different meanings of gender equality and, through a process of progressive questioning and refining, it could further expand its analytical possibilities.

## 5. Conclusions

The argument of this book is that the different and sometimes competing interpretations of gender equality, as manifested in the variety of visions and debates discussed in this chapter, affect the way in which gender equality policies are framed. The discourses developed in such policies, more or less implicitly, express particular representations of what the problem of gender inequality is and what the solution could be. They also include traces about how are gender and other inequalities conceptualized; who has/should have a voice in the framing of gender equality problems and solutions; which structures can gender inequality problems and their solutions be located; what are the mechanisms maintaining and reproducing gender inequality; for whom is gender inequality seen to be a problem; who is represented as the normative group; and who are the target groups of the policy measures proposed, as well as several other issues. These dimensions structure gender equality policy frames, which reflect both the different visions of gender equality, such as inclusion, reversal, and/or displacement, and a variety of theoretical and political debates such as those concerning gender and other inequalities, access to voice for framing policy issues, and the definition of the political, particularly with reference to the public and private divide.

The approach adopted for studying the diversity of meanings of gender equality is Critical Frame Analysis, a methodology that allows the mapping of policy frames through an analysis of different dimensions of the latter. This is particularly helpful for studying the contested and multifaceted concept of gender equality. Frame analysis, that as a methodology presents both potentials and pitfalls, provides a tool for detecting the inconsistencies of policy discourses, including the most feminist ones. It can thus sharpen the way of looking at gender equality by exploring, metaphorically, *what is actually hidden under the carpet of gender equality policies?*

This and other questions related to the diversity of meanings of gender equality as a policy problem are tackled in this book within the context of the European

Union and six member states from the north, west, east, and south of Europe. The different policy frames on gender equality are explored in these contextual locations with respect to the issues of family policies, domestic violence, gender inequality in politics, prostitution, migration, homosexual rights, and anti-discrimination. In the discussion of the different ways of framing gender equality in Europe, each chapter will provide insights on the ongoing theoretical and political debate about “what is gender equality?”, disclosing the visions, debates, and contexts that move around and contribute to shape such a complex and contested concept.

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## **Annex 1.**

### *MAGEEQ Methodology of Critical Frame Analysis* *SUPER-TEXT TEMPLATE*

#### **NUMBER/CODE/ TITLE (max 20 signs)**

- Full title
- (In English and in original language)
- Country/Place
- Issue
- Date
- Type/status of document
- Actor(s) and gender of actor(s) if applicable
- Audience
- Event/reason/occasion of appearance
- Parts of text eliminated

#### **Voice**

##### **SUMMARY**

- Voice(s) speaking
- Perspective
- References: words/concepts (and where they come from)
- References: actors
- References: documents

#### **Diagnosis**

##### **SUMMARY**

- What is represented as the problem?
- Why is it seen as a problem?
- Causality (what is seen as a cause of what?)
- Dimensions of gender (social categories/identity/behavior/norms & symbols/institutions)
- Intersectionality
- Mechanisms (resources/norms & interpretations/legitimization of violence)

- Form (argumentation/style/conviction techniques/dichotomies/metaphors/contrasts)
- Location (organization of labor/organization of intimacy/organization of citizenship)

### **Attribution of roles in diagnosis**

#### SUMMARY

- Causality (who is seen to have made the problem?)
- Responsibility (who is seen as responsible for the problem?)
- Problem holders (whose problem is it seen to be?)
- Normativity (what is a norm group if there is a problem group?)
- Active/passive roles (perpetrators/victims, etc.)
- Legitimization of non-problem(s)

### **Prognosis**

#### SUMMARY

- What to do?
- Hierarchy/priority in goals
- How to achieve goals (strategy/means/instruments)?
- Dimensions of gender (social categories/identity/behavior/norms & symbols/institutions)
- Intersectionality
- Mechanisms (resources/norms & interpretations/violence)
- Form (argumentation/style/conviction techniques/dichotomies/metaphors)
- Location (organization of labor/intimacy/citizenship)

### **Attribution of roles in prognosis**

#### SUMMARY

- Call for action and non-action (who should [not] do what?)
- Who has voice in suggesting suitable course of action?
- Who is acted upon? (target groups)
- Boundaries set to action
- Legitimization of (non)action

## Normativity

### SUMMARY

- What is seen as good?
- What is seen as bad?
- Location of norms in the text (diagnosis/prognosis/elsewhere)

## Balance

### SUMMARY

- Emphasis on different dimensions/elements
- Frictions or contradictions within dimensions/elements

## Comments

