
26. Challenges to feminist knowledge? The economisation of EU gender equality policy

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INTRODUCTION

International institutions and organisations, governments, corporate actors and civil society actors are increasingly relying on gender equality discourses focused on economic growth, human capital, efficiency and corporate productivity. At the same time, neoliberal governance practices, such as cost–benefit calculations and good practices, increasingly shape gender equality policy measures (e.g. Cullen and Murphy, 2018; Kantola and Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2015; Roberts, 2015). It has been argued that such discourses and practices have co-opted feminist governance while, at the same time, providing strategic openings in institutions otherwise hostile to gender equality (Ferguson, 2015; Kunz et al., 2019).

Such developments have been typical of the European Union’s (EU) gender equality policy. In comparison to other international institutions, the EU has been seen as a progressive gender equality actor. The EU fulfils the criteria of feminist governance set in this *Handbook*, and it has brought about important changes in member states in terms of equal pay, maternity and parental leave, and anti-discrimination policy (Kantola, 2010; Jacquot, Chapter 25 of this *Handbook*). Yet the EU’s gender equality policy has since its inception been tied to the EU’s economic priorities (Jacquot, 2015). More recently, EU institutions have explicitly promoted a discourse focused on the macroeconomic benefits of gender equality (Elomäki, 2015), and the focus of policy measures has shifted from legislation to gender mainstreaming, exchange of good practice and other tools of neoliberal governance (Jacquot, 2015). Simultaneously, the EU’s economic policies and economic governance practices have become increasingly hostile to gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017).

This chapter discusses the actors, processes, tools and knowledge that have contributed to the neoliberalisation – or *economisation* – of the EU’s gender equality policy and addresses the effects on feminist governance. Neoliberalisation of feminism has different facets connected to the different understandings of neoliberalism as a political project, ideology and governance (Prügl, 2015). In this chapter, I understand neoliberalism as a political rationality or a form of governance that extends market values and practices to all spheres of life (Brown, 2015; Oksala, 2013). Wendy Brown (2015) has described this process as economisation. I use this term, too, to emphasise my focus on an economic logic that shapes understandings, practices and subjectivities rather than on neoliberalism as an economic policy project. I understand neoliberal economisation of gender equality policy as a process whereby the values, ideals, goals and practices related to economic policy and the corporate sector begin to shape this field. I am particularly interested in the role of knowledge in this process. Economists and economics are often given special authority in policymaking (Fourcade, 2009; Hirschman and Berman, 2014), and this has been the case in EU gender equality policy too (Elomäki, 2020).

I will first map the actors and processes in the neoliberal economisation of the EU's gender equality policy. I then turn to two key challenges that economisation poses for feminist governance: shifts in the meaning of gender equality, and legitimisation of gendered economic policies and narrow notions of the economy. Finally, I discuss the increased reliance on mainstream economics in EU gender equality policy. The chapter brings together gender and EU literature and feminist political economy perspectives. It argues that economisation limits the possibilities of the institutions and actors of feminist governance to challenge the EU's economic priorities, ideas and policies.

ECONOMISATION OF EU GENDER EQUALITY POLICY: PROCESSES, ACTORS AND TOOLS

The EU's gender policies have from the very beginning been linked as much to the pursuit of market-making as to social justice, or even subsumed under the logic of the market (e.g. Jacquot, 2015; Lewis, 2006; van der Vleuten, 2007). The relationship between the market principle and the gender equality principle has taken different forms over time, depending on developments in the EU's economic policy and its economic situation. This section sheds light on the processes, actors and tools that have shaped this relationship and eventually intensified the neoliberal economisation of the EU's gender equality policy. It is important to note that the EU is not a unitary actor and that policy developments, such as economisation, are always contested within and between the EU institutions and the actors that aim to influence them.

From Treaty of Rome to Lisbon Strategy

The manner in which equality between women and men entered the European agenda in 1957, when the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' was included in the Treaty of Rome, is indicative of the economic rationale that has guided the EU's gender equality policies. Article 119 on equal pay was adopted because the French government, which had already introduced legislation on equal pay, was afraid that countries using low-wage female labour might undermine the competitiveness of French industry (Jacquot, 2015: 21–2). The main concern was thus to ensure 'fair competition' rather than to promote gender equality as a value in itself (Lewis, 2006: 420). The scope of gender equality policy soon expanded from equal pay to increasing women's labour market participation (Ostner, 2000). In this early period, gender equality eventually came to be seen as an object to be pursued in itself, but it took the specific form of 'equality *within* the market' (Jacquot, 2015: 20). Whilst this labour-market-centred approach has had a significant impact in countries where women's paid work was constrained by traditional family norms, it also reflects the way EU gender equality policy has focused on themes that support economic integration and goals.

The focus on market-related issues was complemented with discursive economisation, namely, the framing of gender equality as a contribution to economic growth, competitiveness and other economic goals. The idea that gender equality had economic benefits in the sense of women's labour market participation and a better use of human resources appeared in the European Commission's and Council's policy documents in the 1980s. Economic framing of gender equality strengthened in the 1990s, coinciding with the introduction of gender

mainstreaming and the integration of equal opportunities in the EU's employment policy, in particular in the European Employment Strategy (EES) (Elomäki, 2015; see also Repo, 2016.)

The EES can be seen as a key moment in the economisation of EU gender equality policy. It intensified the reduction of gender equality to a question of economic integration and connected gender equality to neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility, entrepreneurship and employability (Rubery, 2017; Wöhl, 2011). Moreover, the EES intensified the framing of gender equality issues through employment rather than gender equality objectives. A prime example is the way the concept of reconciliation of work and family life, introduced into EU gender policy in the late 1980s, shifted meaning after it was incorporated in the EES. Feminist actors within the Commission had originally used the concept to advance the redistribution of domestic and care work between women and men. This feminist goal was overridden by the market-oriented objective of encouraging flexible forms of employment for women, an objective advanced by employment policy actors (Lewis, 2006; Stratigaki, 2004).

The case of the EES indicates the role of gender mainstreaming in the neoliberal economisation of EU gender equality policy. Whilst gender mainstreaming has extended the scope of this policy to areas like development, trade and education, it has further subsumed gender equality under economic objectives and rationales. This is because gender mainstreaming has focused on integrating gender into existing macroeconomic frameworks rather than assessing whether the EU's employment, economic or trade policies are in the interests of gender equality (Hoskyns, 2008; Rubery, 2017; True, 2009). When macroeconomic fundamentals conflict with gender equality objectives, these objectives are dropped from the policy discourse. For instance, the concern for care and unpaid work as well as women's job quality were omitted from the EES focused on increasing the employment rate (Hoskyns, 2008: 118).

In the early 2000s, following the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy with its goals of sustainable economic growth, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion, the Commission and the Council increasingly framed gender equality as a contribution to economic growth. The reorganisation of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005 around the goals of growth and jobs had the effect of further prioritising economic framing (Elomäki, 2015). Jacquot has argued that in this period (1990s–2000s) gender equality was no longer an objective in its own right but became an instrument for other economic policy priorities (Jacquot, 2015: 177). Similarly, Rubery (2017) has characterised the 1990s and the 2000s as an era of 'instrumental policy' where gender equality was considered instrumental to achieving other objectives.

Economic Case for Gender Equality in the Context of Economic Crisis

The end of the first decade of the 2000s signalled a shift from merely subordinating gender equality to economic goals to the explicit development and promotion of a market-oriented gender equality discourse (Elomäki, 2015). This discourse, referred to by the Commission as the 'economic case', turned the long-standing yet sporadic arguments about women as labour market reserve, women's unused human capital and women's labour market participation as a solution to the demographic challenge into a consistent approach that emphasised the macroeconomic benefits of gender equality. The economic case was developed during the financial and economic crisis, and coincided with the further subsuming of the EU's social goals under economic priorities – the strengthening of the EU's austerity-focused economic governance (Crespy and Menz, 2015).

The institutions and actors of feminist governance had a key role in the development of the economic case. Key actors included the European Commission's gender equality bodies and gender experts, the gender equality-friendly Swedish government during its presidency of the European Council in 2009 and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). These actors saw the economic case as a way to increase the visibility of gender equality at the highest political level and advance gender equality in a time of crisis (Elomäki, 2015, 2020). That emphasising economic benefits was seen as the most effective way to promote gender equality can be seen as a way to counter resistance in hostile institutional settings (Ferguson, 2015; Kunz et al., 2019). It can also be interpreted as a result of processes of economisation: gender equality must demonstrate its usefulness for the economy (Brown, 2015).

Empirical studies of the impact of gender equality on economic growth and the costs of inequality, commissioned by the above-mentioned actors, were a key tool in the development and dissemination of the economic case. As part of its gender equality agenda, the 2009 Swedish presidency published a study that estimated that gender equality could increase gross domestic product (GDP) by up to 45 per cent in the EU member states. EIGE's more recent study estimated that gender equality could increase EU GDP per capita by almost 10 per cent by 2050 (see Elomäki, 2020). The emphasis on empirical knowledge indicates that it was no longer sufficient to discursively frame gender equality in economic terms as had been done in the 1990s and early 2000s. In line with ideas of evidence-based policymaking (e.g. Triantafyllou, 2015), one also had to provide empirical evidence of economic benefits.

The economic case quickly became the backbone of EU gender equality policy, and the range of gender equality issues justified in economic terms broadened. The draft directive on gender balance in corporate boards proposed by the Commission in 2012 was the culmination of this development. In the policy debate that paved the way to the directive, the Commission turned women's underrepresentation in economic decision-making, which earlier was mainly seen as an issue of democracy and the sharing of power, into an economic problem related to competitiveness and the use of women's human capital. The debate was so thoroughly economised that some policy documents did not even mention gender equality as a goal (Elomäki, 2018). More recently, Ursula von der Leyen's Commission (see Abels and Mushaben, 2020) has been more inclined to talk about gender equality as a core value of the EU and a fundamental right. Whilst references to values and rights are still complemented by economised framing, the latter are somewhat less prominent than in the early 2010s.

The emphasis on economic arguments for gender equality has also had repercussions at the national level, for instance, through EU programmes that are often a significant source of gender equality funding at national level. For example, in Ireland, the need to rely on EU project funding brought gender balance initiatives that relied on economic arguments into the main women's organisation's work programme (Cullen and Murphy, 2018: 120).

Economic actors and processes have also contributed to the intensification of economisation. The EU's economic governance processes, which were strengthened after the economic crisis, have taken over the role played by the EES two decades earlier. The annual cycle of economic policy coordination, called the European Semester, has subsumed social concerns to economic goals both in terms of policies and understandings (Dawson, 2018), and has done this for gender equality, too. During the European Semester, EU institutions set key reform priorities for the EU: review national performance and policies, and issue policy recommendations for member states. Although the standing of social issues, including gender equality, within the European Semester has increased over the years, only a restricted number of social

issues have been included, and economic goals and ideas shape understandings of social policies and goals (Dawson, 2018). In terms of gender equality this has meant a focus on employment-related issues, mainly women's labour market participation (Chierigato, 2020). Moreover, the economic knowledge and expertise underpinning the Semester sideline crucial gender equality issues such as unpaid work, and misrepresent others, such as the provision of affordable care services, as a cost (Cavaghan and Elomäki, 2020).

Economisation is not a uniform (and not necessarily even a hegemonic) process. Economic discourses have existed side-by-side with other frames, and the discourses of different EU institutions and actors have competed with one another. Parallel to the development of the economic case in the 2010s, the EU gender equality policy has been increasingly engaged with rights and justice, partly due to the move of the Commission's gender equality unit from DG Employment to DG Justice and the consequent distancing of gender equality policy from social policy (Jacquot, 2015; see also Jacquot, Chapter 25 in this *Handbook*). Moreover, alternative conceptualisations of the relationship between gender equality and the economy have existed all along. Already in the late 1990s the Commission's gender experts called for new, more gender-equal systems of economic organisation and for the abandoning of the narrow focus on growth (Elomäki, 2015). In the 2010s, many EU-level gender equality bodies and networks, such as the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM Committee) and the European Women's Lobby (EWL), produced knowledge about the gendered impacts of crisis and austerity (Guerrina, 2017). There are tensions between the different EU institutions too: the Commission has tended to use both economic and rights-based framing; the Council has almost exclusively framed gender equality in economic terms; and the European Parliament has championed human rights frames (Elomäki, 2015; Stratigaki, 2004: 50; True, 2009: 126–7).

THE EFFECTS OF ECONOMISATION ON FEMINIST GOVERNANCE

The economised approach to gender equality in EU policymaking has delivered some benefits, for instance, increased awareness of care issues in the 1990s and early 2000s (Rubery, 2017: 576–7). However, the intensification of economic justifications in the 2010s did not improve the visibility of gender equality in the context of economic crisis and austerity. In fact, gender equality goals disappeared from the EU's long-term economic strategies (Villa and Smith, 2014), and the crisis intensified the ongoing dismantling of the EU's gender equality policy (Ahrens, 2018; Jacquot, 2015). Furthermore, arguments about economic benefits did not change member states' views of gender equality policies as too expensive (van der Vleuten, 2007). For example, the improved maternity leave directive proposed by the Commission in 2008 was blocked by member states who considered it too costly.

At the same time, the economisation of EU gender equality policy has negatively impacted the transformative potential of feminist governance. Existing research has pointed out how economisation, on the one hand, 'shrinks' and 'bends' (Lombardo et al., 2009) the meaning of gender equality in depoliticising ways and constructs neoliberal gendered subjectivities for the purposes of capitalism. On the other hand, economised gender equality discourses legitimise and reproduce neoliberal values, gendered economic policies and gendered understandings of

the economy in ways that circumvent the possibilities of feminist institutions and networks countering gendered policies.

Narrow Understandings of Gender (In)Equality and Economised Subjectivities

Research on EU gender equality policy has drawn attention to the narrow way in which gender equality is conceptualised as equality in the market (Jacquot, 2015). Gender equality issues such as unequal distribution of unpaid work, which do not fit with economic priorities, have often been either sidelined or reframed to fit with the dominant narrative (Lewis, 2006; Stratigaki, 2004). In addition to reconciliation, already discussed above, such reframing took place in the discussion on women's representation in economic decision-making. Here earlier framings related to the equal sharing of power between women and men and women's participation in the making of decisions that affect them and the society gave way to discussions about equality in career advancement (Elomäki, 2018).

These narrow understandings of gender equality are depoliticised. Research on gender policies of internal institutions and multinational corporations has shown how constructions of gender equality in terms of economic growth or business benefits are mainly silent about the structural and historical dimensions of inequality and how problem representations and solutions tend to focus on individuals (Elias, 2013; Prügl, 2015; Roberts, 2015). Although EU policymaking has also sought system-level solutions in the form of legislation and increased child care provision, the discourses and knowledge backing these solutions have tended to sideline gendered structures and focus on individual behaviour. For instance, the debate on women on corporate boards took the perspective of well-educated and skilled individuals and their right to compete for board positions in equal terms with men (Elomäki, 2018). These co-opted understandings provide limited tools for EU-level feminist governance to transform gender relations. For instance, the economised reconciliation discourses and policies left the gendered division of labour within families out of consideration and failed to challenge it (Stratigaki, 2004: 50).

Economised understandings of gender equality are connected to the construction of specific kinds of economic subjects. Whether located within the EU or outside of its borders, these subjects mainly operate within the market economy, freed from the social and gendered power relations rendered invisible by policy discourses (True, 2009: 131). These subjects are responsible for the European economy as a whole through being employable and acting as self-responsible entrepreneurs (Wöhl, 2011). They tirelessly climb the career ladder and thereby enhance the EU's competitiveness and ensure that governments get return on their investments in education (Elomäki, 2018). Importantly, their responsibility extends to meeting the EU's biopolitical needs through producing the next generation of wage workers. These subjects self-regulate their reproductive and productive behaviour to find an optimal work-life balance for the benefit of the EU as a whole (Repo, 2016: 319–20).

These depoliticised understandings of gender equality that suit the needs of neoliberal capitalism and that reproduce neoliberal rationales and values are embedded in the empirical knowledge that underpins economised discourses. The economic theories, methods and models used by EU institutions to estimate the economic benefits of gender equality have reduced gender equality to equal amounts of paid work and equal productivity. Furthermore, when issues such as unequal division of unpaid work or gender pay gap have been translated into the macroeconomic language of labour supply and productivity, their meaning has been

radically transformed and power relations and structural inequalities have been legitimised or rendered invisible (Elomäki, 2020).

Legitimisation of Gendered Economic Policies and Narrow Understandings of the Economy

One of the key concerns in the literature on neoliberal gender equality policies and discourses is that they rarely criticise the dominant economic policies and corporate practices that have been shown to uphold gender inequalities at global, national and local levels. Therefore, these policies and discourses legitimise gendered policies and capitalist accumulation (Ferguson, 2015; Roberts, 2015). At the EU-level, the integration of a gender perspective into the EES in the late 1990s supported policies that flexibilised labour markets and promoted non-standard forms of work (Rubery, 2017: 578; Stratigaki, 2004; Wöhl, 2011). The economic case for gender equality in the 2010s, in turn, legitimised economic growth as the EU's main goal and gave silent agreement to budget discipline and fiscal consolidation as the key means to achieve economic growth (Elomäki, 2015).

The EU's post-crisis austerity policies had manifold gendered impacts in member states. These ranged from increased gendered economic inequalities, shifting of responsibility for care from the state to households and the intensification of the crisis of social reproduction, to increased violence against women and the dismantling of gender equality institutions and policies (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Bruff and Wöhl, 2016; Kantola and Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini and Rubery, 2014). EU gender equality policy documents of the 2010s that emphasised gender equality as a factor of economic growth were silent about the gendered impacts of the EU's crisis response policies. This illustrates the one-way approach to the relationship between economy and gender equality that is characteristic of economised discourses. The contribution of gender equality to the economy is acknowledged, but the causal arrow is not reversed to see how economic policies impact gender equality (Elomäki, 2015).

Moreover, economised gender equality discourses reproduce gendered and narrow assumptions of what the economy is and how it functions that are typical of neoclassical economics (see e.g. Folbre, 2009). Mainstream economic thinking and economic policies often neglect the interrelationships between the 'productive' market economy and the 'reproductive' economy constituted of the paid and unpaid activities needed to reproduce life. Yet, as feminist political economists have shown, social reproduction is necessary for the functioning of the economy (e.g. Elson, 1994; Hoskyns and Rai, 2007). This neglect is also visible in EU policy-making. The EU's economic governance ignores unpaid work and those who provide it, often at high personal cost, undervalues monetised care work and sees public care as a cost, rather than as an investment (Cavaghan and Elomäki, 2021). Similarly, the EU-level studies on the economic benefits of gender equality that form the evidence-base for the economic case ignore unpaid care and its contribution to the economy and reinforce the undervaluation of care work within the monetised economy (Elomäki, 2020). The way unpaid and monetised reproductive work disappears from view is particularly worrying in a situation where austerity politics and neoliberal governance shift care work to households and intensify the crisis of care and social reproduction across the EU (e.g. Bruff and Wöhl, 2016).

ECONOMISATION OF EXPERT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY

The economisation of EU gender equality policy and the related demand for empirical evidence of the economic benefits of gender equality has implications for the kind of expert knowledge about gender equality that is valued in EU policymaking. In line with the prioritisation of economists and economics in policymaking (Fourcade, 2009; Hirschman and Berman, 2014), gender experts working in global governance structures, such as the World Bank, have increasingly sought authority by drawing on economics and other quantitative knowledge that employs positivist methodologies (Kunz et al., 2019). At the EU-level, expert knowledge about gender equality has traditionally drawn on a wider range of disciplines and methods. However, the interest in the economic benefits of gender equality has engaged mainstream economists – for instance, consultancy companies with little experience in gender equality – and tools of knowledge production typical of the economics discipline. Thus it is not only EU gender equality policy that is being economised. As I have argued elsewhere (Elomäki, 2020), we are also witnessing economisation of expert knowledge about gender equality in EU policymaking.

This shift towards economic modes of knowledge production is a shift towards more positivist, technical and quantitative knowledge about gender equality that emphasises mathematical proofs and causalities (Ylöstalo, 2020). The emphasis on quantifiable, monetised evidence runs counter to the way feminist theories and methodologies have expanded what counts as evidence. Whilst there is no conclusive evidence that EU institutions see economised knowledge as a more desirable basis for gender equality policy than other forms of gender expertise, the institutions have represented such knowledge as objective, indisputable and particularly relevant (Elomäki, 2020). This common strategy to give economics a higher status than other social sciences (Fourcade, 2009) implicitly casts other forms of knowledge as more subjective and ideological. Yet this economised expert knowledge and its modes of knowledge production rely on specific theories about what the economy is, how it works and how people make choices, which are not value-free but involve gendered biases and background assumptions (e.g. Folbre, 2009).

A key challenge posed by the economisation of gender equality expertise is a shift in which aspects of gender equality and human activities are analytically visible and intelligible to us. The EU institutions' reliance on mainstream economics to support gender equality claims restricts the range of issues from which knowledge can be produced and has an impact on the kind of truth claims that can be made about the gendered structures of the economy and gender equality. Importantly, through sidelining issues related to social reproduction, the economised knowledge about gender equality financed and promoted by EU institutions may make it harder to account for the gendered effects of austerity and neoliberal governance reforms, such as the increasing strain that cuts in public spending and the marketisation and privatisation of public services put on social reproduction and care.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shed light on the neoliberal economisation of the EU's gender equality policy – the expansion of market goals, values, practices and knowledge to this field – as well

as reflected on the challenges this poses for feminist governance. I have shown how the economised framings promoted by some EU institutions, including actors of feminist governance therein, have ‘bent’ and ‘shrunk’ the meaning of gender equality in individualising and depoliticising ways. I have also illustrated how economised gender equality discourses legitimise the EU’s gendered economic policies and reproduce narrow understandings of the economy. Finally, I have suggested that the discursive economisation of gender equality policy is closely connected to the economisation of expert knowledge about gender equality, that is, increased reliance on mainstream economic knowledge in gender equality policymaking.

I will conclude with a reflection on the implications of economisation for feminist knowledge and its capacity to influence EU policymaking in the crucial area of economic policy. The actors of feminist governance are facing major challenges in this policy field. For instance, knowledge about the gender impacts of austerity produced by feminist actors was not included in the EU’s response to the 2008 economic crisis (Guerrina, 2017), and integrating gender perspectives in economic governance processes, like the European Semester, has been difficult. Scholars have identified several reasons for the neglect of feminist knowledge in this field. First, the male-dominated character of key economic decision-making spaces has implications for their working culture and the possibilities of moving gender equality forward (Guerrina, 2017; Walby, 2015). Second, the narrow constructions of economic expertise and ‘objective’ knowledge in these spaces sideline feminist knowledge, which is often seen as political and ideological. Finally, gender equality actors have found it difficult to communicate using the abstract and mathematical vocabulary that has become a key ‘legitimacy requirement’ for participation in economic policy debates (Cavaghan, 2017; O’Dwyer, 2019).

Could economised knowledge, although different from knowledge about economic benefits that has been prominent in EU gender equality policy, provide a solution to these problems? In some contexts, feminist actors have successfully mobilised quantified knowledge based on economic modes of knowledge production – for example, calculations of distributive gender impacts – to criticise dominant economic policies and advocate for feminist alternatives (Cavaghan, 2020; Ylöstalo, 2020). Even if critical of existing economic policies, however, this knowledge comes with drawbacks similar to those related to the evidence about economic benefits. It reduces gender impacts to monetised distributive impacts, reproduces the (gendered) methodologies and assumptions of mainstream economic thinking, and prioritises economists as the main producers of policy-relevant knowledge, sidelining other feminist voices and other types of feminist knowledge (Ylöstalo, 2020). Eventually, the kind of feminist knowledge needed to re-think the macroeconomic objectives of the EU and change the course of its economic policies would have to break the false distinction between productive and the reproductive sectors of the economy that underpins the EU’s policies. Acknowledging the role of social reproduction would extend our understanding of what the economy is and how it functions and lead to more gender equal economies where gender equality is not subsumed under economic goals.¹

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