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**Revisiting gender equality at times of recession: A discussion of gender and politics scholarship's strategies of dealing with equality**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to explore the ways in which gender equality is used in gender and politics research. We contend that the political and theoretical relevance of studying the multiple meanings of gender equality is enhanced by current crises. We discern four strategies used in gender and politics research: (i) escaping equality, (ii) fixing equality, (iii) deconstructing equality, or (iv) delegating equality to political theory. This article is motivated by the belief that what is needed is not just more reflection on these choices but also a productive dialogue between the different strategies.

**Introduction**

Like so many concepts in politics, gender equality is an essentially contested one. As a term, gender equality is riddled with paradoxes and contestations. There are those who simply take a position against it in defense of patriarchy. For many, it is so self-evident that it need not be discussed politically. Paradoxically, while inequality is well documented in today's societies, the idea that gender equality has already been

achieved is an almost permanent feature of this century. The argument that there is no gender inequality left is a strong claim for deeming it irrelevant for political practice.

Political practice is not the only arena where gender equality is neglected. This article addresses what is done with the concept of gender equality in academic research. There too, its use is by no means obvious, decisions to use it or not are rarely articulated, debates about alternatives are almost absent. In feminist theory too, gender equality can appear as old-fashioned and out of date. For instance, in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Disch and Hawkesworth 2017), it is not among the 48 key feminist concepts.

Gender equality thus appears as a problematic concept. Calls for gender equality continue to spark strong emotional responses of both enthusiasm and anger, as anyone teaching the subject or engaging in civil society or political struggles would know. All scholars choose their own strategy to deal with this political nature. In this article, we discern four such strategies in gender and politics research: (i) diverting to euphemisms such as ‘women-friendly’ or ‘gender sensitive’, (ii) making a firm empirical choice of how to define or operationalize it, (iii) adopting a distant deconstructive approach that enables opting out of this quandary, or (iv) grounding oneself in normative political theory, in the field of gender and politics. This article is motivated by the belief that more reflection on these choices and – most importantly – a dialogue between them is productive for us all.

The aim of this article therefore, is to analyse recent developments in gender and politics scholarship in relation to gender equality in order to make scholarly progress.

Progress can be made through fostering dialogue between the different strategies towards gender equality which we have identified. It is our contention that feminist political science debates have become increasingly sophisticated in *empirically* analyzing political gender inequality and political and policy processes meant to foster gender equality. Yet, we ourselves, have been struck by frustration in our own research where we tend to prove over and over again what we already know, and what is already substantially proven: that the world is gendered and that there is still gender inequality. At the same time the changes in the current political context have made appeals to gender equality more controversial and responding to these changes is highly needed (see e.g. Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, Verloo 2018). Hence, we argue that empirical studies on gender equality need not just draw upon the achievements made in theoretical insights, but to engage deeply with them.

We open the article with a discussion about current political and social context in Europe, where gender equality and policies around it have faced new backlashes as a result of the economic crisis. Whilst some of these struggles around gender equality are old and well known and studied, the current crisis has intensified them and made the requirement to analyse and theorize gender equality more pertinent than ever. Next, we discern and analyse the four strategies of gender and politics research in relation to gender equality: (i) *escaping equality*, (ii) *fixing equality*, (iii) *deconstructing equality*, and (iv) *delegating equality to theory*. We evaluate the significance of each approach for understanding gender equality and for genuinely moving the theoretical debates forward. The discussion illustrates our key argument: there is not enough attention for this now, yet there is definitely a potential for more explicit theoretical debates on

gender equality. We conclude by re-focusing on the crisis and how it makes this call more urgent.

### **Equality in recession**

The political and societal context of our arguments and analysis is marked by the current debate about 'equality in recession'. Debates about backlashes against equality have figured in feminist political analyses for decades (Chafetz and Dworkin 1987, Chappell 2006). Feminist scholars have been well aware of the fact that unlike in the public discourse, progress towards 'gender equality' is rarely linear (Evans 2017: 4).

Yet, the past ten years, which have been marked by a financial and economic crisis in the Western world, have had special consequences for gender equality (Walby 2015). Equality has been delegated a very particular position in this current crisis. In the European Union (EU), equality has been in recession itself (Jacquot 2015 and 2017; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). The preferred policy approaches to the economic crisis have been austerity politics: cutting down state spending, cutting down welfare services, public sector employment, welfare benefits. The approach has targeted some women in particular, swiping out their livelihoods, houses, childcare places, pensions and jobs. An intersectional gender analysis shows that black and ethnic minority women have, on the one hand, experienced such conditions for much longer and lived in a permanent state of crisis, but, on the other hand, have also experienced increased vulnerabilities (Emejulu and Bassel 2017). The equality concerns of sexual and gender minorities, for instance in the form of service provision, have also been pushed aside in the name of saving costs (Smith 2017). This has the potential to exacerbate hierarchies

between different groups – white gay men and black trans people – whilst also pitting groups against one another and causing competition over scarcer resources and visibility (Ayoub 2017, Verloo 2013).

While the EU's gender equality policies have stagnated, its new economic policies have not been based on an analysis of their gender impacts (Jacquot 2015; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). Gender policy making tools, such as gender mainstreaming, gender impact assessments and gender budgeting, have been left to languish. The economic and financial crisis has marked a time when gender equality policy has stopped advancing in the EU and in its member states. Gender equality policy has had to give way to concerns about the economy and economic policy and feminist actors have had difficulties to engage with the issue (Cavaghan 2017; Kantola 2018).

A political response to the economic crisis has been the rise of populist and radical right politics in different contexts (Kantola and Lombardo 2017). In Europe and elsewhere, this constitutes a backlash against gender equality. Gender equality has been partly dismissed as a feminist elite ideology foreign to some European countries (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), and opposition to gender equality appears to grow (Verloo 2018). With regard to reproductive rights, the European Parliament's right wing political groups, in questioning the very principles of gender equality, have shifted the EU's hitherto progressive outlook to a more conservative stance in recent abortion debates (Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2016).

The current political context of gender equality is characterized by the impacts of coinciding political projects of neoliberalism, conservatism and nationalism (Elomäki

and Kantola 2018). The impact of such coincidence can be particularly detrimental to equality efforts as exemplified in the case of austerity politics. Austerity politics has been based on conservative views about women's care roles in the society, neoliberal politics of cutting down the welfare state, and nationalist politics providing welfare services only for national majorities and curtailing rights of immigrants and refugees (Elomäki and Kantola 2018).

Each of these hegemonic political projects has presented its own challenges for gender equality efforts. A context of strengthened neoliberalism means that attention for material inequality and for the impact of structural inequality on people's choices are cut out of political debate as irrelevant. A context of strengthened conservatism means racial forms of intersectional inequality are legitimized, constructing lives out of the gender binary becomes almost impossible and bodily autonomy is restricted, while the shrunken political sphere is severely limiting the potential of civil society. Nationalism, especially in its extreme right forms, adds to these dangers specifically that the role of international norms or institutions, and the potential of international solidarity is impeded.

Hence, we suggest, it is all the more necessary to be very articulate about what is meant by gender equality in order to detect and fight co-optation and develop strategies to enable further feminist progress. The ongoing economic, political and social crisis has intensified the challenges that gender equality faces. These challenges, whether they come in the form of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, populism, conservatism or nationalism, do have long historical roots in different societies. Feminist political

analysis has a long feminist history too, which goes beyond the current crisis, as illustrated below.

### **What is feminist political analysis doing in relation to this?**

Gender and politics research has become a vibrant field of its own over the past two decades (Mügge, Evans and Engeli 2016; Dahlerup 2010; Waylen et al 2013). As a result, theoretical, conceptual and methodological approaches to analysing gender are diverse and come from different traditions. In relation to ‘gender’, they range from understanding gender as variables of women and men to analysing gendered structures, from deconstruction and emphasising discursive aspects of gender relations to understanding intersectionality and material, emotional and affective aspects with post-deconstruction (see e.g. Kantola and Lombardo 2017a). Each can shed light to different aspects of political phenomena.

In terms of key topics on gender equality, empirical research has been conducted into: gender inequalities in institutions, such as political parties or parliaments; policies in a wide range of policy fields and policy making stages as well as gender equality policy making tools, such as gender mainstreaming or gender quotas. There is also a visible interest in the questions of how gender equality interacts with different societal discourses and governance modes such as neoliberalism, conservatism or populism and how it gets transformed, stretched and bended in the process (Fraser 2009; Celis & Childs 2014; Elomäki and Kantola 2018; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2017; Spierings et al 2015). There is substantial progress in studies on gender equality norm transfer between transnational, international, national and local levels in research on

Europeanisation (Kantola 2010; Lombardo and Forest 2009) and on transnational institutions (van der Vleuten et al 2014). Attention for the role of media - including social media - in gendered political dynamics is also growing (Padovani and Pavan 2016; Pajnik and Sauer 2017).

For the purposes of this article, we have discerned four distinct ways in which gender equality is treated in these debates. These are: (i) *escaping equality*, (ii) *fixing equality*, (iii) *deconstructing equality*, and (iv) *delegating equality to theory*. We evaluate the significance of each approach for understanding gender equality and for genuinely moving the theoretical debates forward. The discussion illustrates our key argument: there is not enough attention for this now, yet there is a potential for more explicit theoretical debates on gender equality.

### **Escaping equality**

One distinct way of scholarly dealing with the ‘multiple meanings of gender equality’ problem – with the fact that it is unavoidably a political concept on which there will never be an agreement across actors or contexts – is to shift to other words that function as synonyms for it but are largely left undefined. Resorting to the use of euphemisms such as women-friendly or gender sensitive seemingly avoids a confrontation with the political nature of gender and politics research. Moreover, the use of words such as ‘friendly’, or ‘sensitive’, evokes visions of harmony instead of struggle. In evoking friendliness or harmony these wordings undermine the critical edge of feminist analysis. These euphemisms have been around for a while.

In 1990, Kathleen Jones thanked Helga Hernes for the 'felicitous phrase 'woman-friendly polity', in a *Signs* article that since was quoted 309 times (Google Scholar 28-12-2017). In 1987, Hernes had described the Scandinavian countries as potentially woman-friendly societies, meaning a state that would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex (Hernes 1987, 15). For Hernes, equal representation in politics (and hence women's voice) was strongly connected to this.

Later, Borchorst and Siim, in their influential 2002 article on women-friendly welfare states note that the concept should be reformulated and contextualized to shed its 'Scandinavian welfare state' bias. Pluralizing 'women' without further explanation, they argue for a reformulation that enables an analytical distinction between 'women-friendliness', and 'policies that promote gender equality' (90), because of the many conceptual problems with the concept of 'women-friendliness'. They argue rightly that the concept is based on a problematic assumption of women's needs as common and incontestable, that it is strongly understood as based on the premise of women's labour market participation as the key issue, that it is too implicit in how it deals with the issue of voice and of multiple inequalities, and that it fails to articulate whether the interests of fathers and mothers are similar or contradictory. With this critique, Borchorst and Siim take a postmodern and anti-essentialist perspective. In a later article, changing back to the original 'woman-friendly', they contrast Hernes' 'rosy' depiction of (the potential of) Scandinavian welfare states with the harsh critique of Hirdman (1996) that the Scandinavian gender system is largely intact because of ongoing gender segregation and hierarchies based upon a male norm.

While the concept of woman/women-friendly policies is seen as strong on metaphors, but weak on analytical capacity, it is still widely used. With its universal and essentialist connotation, it functions best when research does not question explicitly to what degree women's needs or interests are common (see Vickers 2011, Wang 2013, Curtin 2014). Many texts have in common that they use the concept in an almost colloquial way, without reference to its genealogy or to earlier critiques. The concepts of woman-friendly, women-friendly and gender friendly are also used indiscriminately it seems<sup>1</sup> (at times complemented by family-friendly in the context of discussions about gender and the welfare state).

'Gender friendly' is also around for a while (see Daly 1994), in which gender is explicitly seen as referring to structural, relational and symbolic inequality between women and men. Yet the link to the structural nature of gender inequality has not been used to define this concept more explicitly. Often both concepts (wome/an-friendly and gender friendly) are used in texts that focus on the relationship between descriptive and substantial representation, where they are put on a par with substantive representation, or 'progressive gender agendas' (515) (Waylen 2015). When the term 'gender-friendly change' is defined, as 'any change that contributes to improvements in gender equality' (Waylen 2016: 11), the concept gets into a loop of undefinedness where it still eludes a more precise articulation of its position on the political meaning of gender/ women/ or gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> For an example see Waylen's book (2016) with 21 mentions of gender friendly and 3 mentions of women-friendly: by Waylen, Franceschet and Staab, with no apparent difference in meaning.

The problem then with the shift to all these ‘friendly’ concepts is that they are floating; they disregard the political nature of feminist visions; they have become disconnected from earlier work and from developments in feminist theory in doing so; and all these flaws impede further conceptual progress, an essential part of the cumulative debate on gender equality which we advocate in this article.

Similar to the concept of women-friendliness, the concept of ‘*gender sensitive*’ policies and politics originates in the (Scandinavian) welfare state scholarship (Orloff 1993, Lewis and Ostner 1992). It is also widely used in the gender and politics field, for instance in relation to ‘gender sensitive parliaments’ (Wängnerud 2015, Budlender 2002; Budlender and Sharp 1998, Skjeie and Teigen 2005, Bacchi and Eveline 2015, Kabeer 2015). An earlier form of talking about ‘women-sensitive programs’ – especially in the field of development studies - has strong connotations of being the opposite of being blind to the needs of women (see Nelson 1995; Kardam 1991; Jones and Holmes 2011). This then resonates strongly with the old discussion about the distinction between ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ gender needs of women (Moser 1989), in the sense that it seems to target ‘practical’ gender needs. Strategic gender needs are those needs which are formulated from the analysis of women’s subordination to men (Moser 1989). Practical gender needs, in turn, are those needs which are formulated from the concrete conditions women experience, in their engendered position within the world. Therefore, they are usually a response to an immediate perceived necessity which is identified by women within a specific context, that does not ‘challenge the prevailing forms of subordination even though they arise directly out of them’ (Molyneux, 1985: 233).

The concept of *gender responsiveness*, used frequently in the field of gender budgeting (a specific strategy to implement gender mainstreaming), is seen as intending to eliminate gender bias or gender blindness in financial allocation of resources in policies (Sarraf 2003, Elson 2002). The choice for ‘gender’ instead of ‘women’ is deliberate. In Elson’s (2002) definition, a gender-responsive budget: ‘aims to analyze any form of public expenditure, identifying implications and impacts to women and girls, as compared to men and boys. The key question is: what impact does this fiscal measure have on gender equality? Does it reduce gender inequality; increase it; or leave unchanged’ (1). It is also a deliberate choice to not specify further which features of gender equality should be addressed, because this allows for contextual flexibility (Sarraf 2003).

Yet, Hannah-Moffat’s (2010) thorough analysis of the use of gender-sensitivity and gender responsiveness in relation to penal policies may be indicative of the minefield that these terms involve: ‘The rhetoric of gender or cultural responsiveness has the capacity to disguise and minimise systemic and interpersonal power relations’ (208). She states that gender responsive measures rarely question stereotypical femininities and the implicit normative assumptions routinely made about women (198).

The range of escapist concepts discussed here have an ambition in common that would merit to be rescued: the ambition to avoid gender blindness or gender bias. Yet, in not operationalising what features of sex and gender need to be taken into account and how, they are too open for co-optation in the form of stereotypical or hegemonic notions of sex and gender. The problem then with the use of concepts such as ‘women-’ or ‘gender-friendly’, ‘gender-sensitive’ or ‘gender-responsive’ is: there is a troubling

evocation of harmonious change that sits uneasily with the need to challenge the status quo (Verloo 2001); given the absence of clearly defined operationalizations, they do not contribute to any better understanding of gender equality; and there is a lack of analytical clarity and of cumulative discussion. What is needed is to address gender blindness and gender bias through operationalizations of both gender equality and alternative concepts, and cumulative and critical debates about them.

### **Fixing equality**

A second strategy towards studying gender equality in gender and politics scholarship, which we identify in this article, is ‘fixing equality’. By ‘fixing equality’ we mean studies that explore different levels of gender equality and different political and policy processes surrounding gender equality by determining the contents and significance of gender equality a-priori. This is done in various ways: by using international gender equality indicators, standards or norms, such as the Beijing Platform for Action where gender equality as women’s rights is approached through 12 key areas, or previous literatures and studies on gender equality and women’s rights. Such definitions and measures, including indicators, can and have become increasingly sophisticated over time and do incorporate more multifaceted understandings of gender equality. They surely have value in that they have extended the range of domains included beyond the polity or the economy. We suggest, however, that they can represent a way of fixing equality in academic scholarship, and that this does not preclude the need for ongoing reflection and critique of the choices made. We note that there is not exactly a lively scholarly discussion about the merits and ongoing challenges of these indicators, hindering further progress (but see Ertan 2016).

Fixing equality is a common approach in comparative studies of gender equality policy, linked to their need to measure it. Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon (2010) made a powerful call for such studies and noted that gender and politics scholars had shied away from them, leaving the field to mainstream political science. To be able to undertake such comparative studies on gender equality, they proposed a definition of gender equality as an end state which has not yet been achieved:

We understand gender as the constellation of institutions, including policies, laws, and norms, that constitute the roles, relations, and identities of women and men, and the feminine and the masculine, in a given context. Gender equality is only one possible form of such a configuration though it exists in no contemporary state. Male dominance is the most common form and is manifest to varying degrees in most societies. (Htun and Weldon 2010: 208).

They make a strong argument for the need to differentiate the category of gender equality issues, which involve different actors, conflicts, institutions and have different consequences for gender relations. Gender equality is understood as strongly rights-based, differentiated into *class-based issues*, namely women's economic and social rights, such as parental leave systems, public childcare and employment rights, and *status-based rights*, signifying women's reproductive rights, gender violence, sexual harassment or gender stereotyping, to bring out these dynamics (Htun and Weldon 2010: 209).

In another article, Htun and Weldon (2015) analyse the impact of cross-national variation in phenomena, such as religion and state approach to religion, on gender equality in family law. Using a new index of sex equality in family law which assesses

formal legal equality ‘in thirteen areas, including marriage, property, parenting, inheritance, and divorce’ the authors show a strong association between the political institutionalization of religious authority and sex equality in family law’ (Htun and Weldon 2015: 452, 461). The higher the value of the index, the more a country’s legal regime can be judged to achieve formal equality (Htun and Weldon 2015: 461). This article demonstrated a strong association between sex discrimination in family law and the political institutionalization of religious authority. When state power and religious power are fused, particularly in highly devout societies, it is difficult to reform family law toward greater equality, and patriarchal norms endure (Htun and Weldon 2015: 469). Notably, ‘political institutionalisation of religious authority’ is discussed, explained and problematized more in the article than ‘sex equality’, ‘women’s rights’ or egalitarianism (Htun and Weldon 2015: 464). Still, the choices Htun and Weldon made and their clear presentation of them enable other scholars to relate to their research and findings very specifically.

Claire Annesley, Isabelle Engeli and Francesca Gains (2015) draw upon this distinction in their study of how different types of gender equality issues are likely to gain the attention of executives. They suggest that many studies of gender equality focus on single issues, including gender equality in the welfare state, women’s political representation or the promotion of reproductive rights, but there is a need to rather conceive of ‘gender equality as multidimensional, encompassing a broad range of issues’ (Annesley, Engeli and Gains 2015: 527). These different policy issues each seek to gain political attention and to enter the political agenda. The key findings illustrate that gender equality issues are not homogeneous and they do not respond to the same issue determinants. Promoting class-based gender equality issues is more dependent on

party ideology (social democracy), and good economic performance and increased numbers of women parliamentarians than status-based issues, which were less affected by these factors (Annesley, Engeli and Gains 2015: 537).

A very dominant form of fixing equality is linked to formal political participation, visible in the wealth of research on gender quotas in politics. As Jones (1990) noted: “Feminist ideas about political institutions stress participation almost to the point of obsession” (p. 788). This is not to take a position that participation in formal political institutions is not important. Formal politics is important. Such a dominance in focus only becomes problematic at the aggregate level. At the level of the scholarly field of gender and politics, more attention for political struggles and effects outside the domain of politics is crucial to complement the study of gender in formal politics. The urgency of such attention has only increased with the delegation of democratic power from formal politics to economic actors under conditions of neoliberalism, and with the trend towards small government that excludes whole areas from democratic deliberation and decision making.

When differentiating the category of gender equality into different issues, which have their own dynamics and conflicts, gender equality in these studies becomes more articulated. However, this does not entail unfortunately that its political or normative dimensions are dealt with.

### **Deconstructing equality**

A third strategy of dealing with the complex nature of gender equality in gender and politics research is to turn it into the main empirical question from a deconstruction perspective. As an approach to gender, deconstruction means disrupting and displacing hierarchies, norms and binaries, calling into question the normalized usage of terms and opening them to new usages (Kantola and Lombardo 2017a). This way, studies can explore the different meanings that gender equality takes in various practices, and – at least for a while – escape having to take position themselves. One way is to have a prominent focus on the discursive politics of gender equality, in which the struggles over the meaning of gender equality as well as the time specific outcomes of these struggles are studied, without necessarily explicitly deconstructing those. These studies aim to describe, compare and explain the different meanings of gender equality in a particular context, often leading to a strong accent on methodology (Bacchi 1999, Kantola 2006, Verloo 2007, Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009, Ferree 2012, van der Haar and Verloo 2016). Until now, this approach has delivered improved methodologies for comparing the various meanings of gender equality (mostly in the Western world) and achieved some success at explaining the presence of particular understandings in particular settings. It has illustrated how the meaning of gender equality has developed contextually as linked to other dominant discourses such as class equality or civil rights (Ferree 2012). Yet, the focus is often more on describing, classifying or explaining than on deconstructing or even criticizing the meanings of gender equality that are found empirically (but see Krizsan and Lombardo 2013). In stopping short of this, research seems to ignore the political nature of gender equality again.

In the field of political representation, in turn, the deconstructionist approach has signified challenging the notion of ‘women’s interests’ as objectively defined, studied and represented in politics (Celis et al 2008). The focus has shifted to the way in which these interests - and indeed ‘gender’ itself - are constructed in the processes of representation, namely, to the ‘constitutive representation of gender’ (Squires 2008; Celis et al 2014).

The deconstructionist approach has been particularly popular in the Nordic context and among Nordic scholars (Holli 2003; Skjeie and Teigen 2005; Kantola 2006; Rönnblom 2009). Based on a clear need to deconstruct the Nordic discourse of gender equality, which is so hegemonic and so closely tied to the national identities of the countries, Nordic feminist scholars have worked to show how the hegemonic discourse of gender equality closes off a number of crucial gender issues, such as violence, and takes the heterosexual white middle-class woman and a mother as its political subject. Most recently, particular understandings of gender equality discourse are used to educate immigrants who are constructed as its others (Keskinen et al. 2009). As Lena Martinsson, Gabriele Griffin and Katarina Giritli Nygren (2017: 1) argue in the introduction to the book *Challenging the Myth of Gender Equality in Sweden*: “We suggest that the hegemonic norm of gender equality in Sweden builds upon and produces naturalised, nationalist, hetero- and cisnormative and racialized positions in a postcolonial and neoliberal time and space.” In such deconstructionist approaches, gender equality is first and foremost a *norm* upheld not only by feminists but especially by those in power who define it in specific ways often excluding the inequality concerns of less powerful (e.g. poor, racialized, or trans) people.

Analytically, deconstructionist approaches expose the complex ways in which power works on gender equality. As a result of the workings of power, the position of gender equality in a societal discourse in the Nordic countries cannot be understood as self-evidently 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate', so that its legitimate or illegitimate position would explain its progress or lack of progress (Nousiainen et al 2013). Rather power works in Foucauldian ways in relation to gender equality by pushing it to the grey zone of a-legitimacy. This is where gender equality is pushed to margins, by being neither self-evidently legitimate or illegitimate but by occupying a much more complex position in a grey zone and being harder to defend and push for.

There is still not much work that combines the discursive analysis of the meaning of gender equality with a study of how the outcomes result from the different power positions of actors. Moreover, it is rather rare to find studies that compare or contrast the meaning of gender equality from mainstream and feminist actors (but see Celis 2007, Verloo 2007), introducing at least a temporary and empirical assessment of what meaning would be more beneficial for the struggle against gender inequality.

The weaknesses of the discursive approach are seen to be that the material aspects of gender inequality are downplayed, and with it the real material interests of women in a gender unequal world (Kantola and Lombardo 2017a). Yet, the main weakness of deconstructing gender equality is the flip side of its strength. If no evaluative choices on the meaning of gender equality are made, the potential contribution of this work to furthering the feminist project is obscured and hindered. Even if discursive research does not stop at just dutifully analysing what the meaning is that various actors give to it and unravels the strategies and actions of actors that lead to certain meanings

becoming dominant, it may deliver potential knowledge that can be used by others in political struggles against gender inequality. While creating this knowledge is necessarily already a political intervention, as an approach this scholarly strategy assumes the impossible possibility of taking an a-political stance.

### **Delegating equality to political theory**

The fourth strategy, which we discuss in this article, is delegating equality to political theory. Delegating gender equality to (feminist) political theory, first, provided answers to questions such as: what is gender equality to be based upon, what are to be its norms and standards? This, in turn, led to a debate on sameness and difference, the so-called Wollstonecraft dilemma. Should equality be achieved on the basis of women's sameness to men (male attributes acting as a norm now to be opened up to women) or on the basis of women's difference to men (potentially keeping women in the margins)? The dichotomy has later been displaced as a false one through diversity or displacement (Squires 1999). Squires' work has been very influential in Europe and the main features upon which her work is based are also among what Disch and Hawkesworth argue to be the "three common characteristics of feminist theory projects in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries", by which they refer to efforts to "denaturalize what passes for difference, challenge the aspiration to produce universal and impartial knowledge and engage with the complexity of power relations through intersectional analysis" (p.1). These three characteristics of anti-essentialism, anti-universalism and complexity of inequality are also, we argue, among the main undiscussed or left aside dimensions of how scholars of gender and politics deal with gender equality.

Second, delegating equality to political theory also provides answers to questions such as: what should equality be like? In this theoretical debate, economic and social rights and equality were broadened to cultural identity (see Squires 2013: 731). Equality requires both the redistribution of material goods – as in the case of pay equality or tackling feminization of poverty – and recognition of cultural identities – as in the case of prominent LGBTQI struggles. Nancy Fraser’s (1995; 1997) distinction between ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’ quickly came popular in gender and politics research. Htun and Weldon’s (2010) distinction between status-based policies and class-based policies discussed above resembles Fraser’s politics of recognition and redistribution. Iris Marion Young’s (1999) work has highlighted the need for a third R in gender equality, namely representation, a voice in political and democratic decision-making (see also Phillips 1995). Fraser has been applied in combination with empirical analysis as a base to fix the understanding of gender equality, but only occasionally (Ciccia and Verloo 2012, Ciccia and Bleijenbergh 2014).

Iris Marian Young’s intervention in the debates on how to deal with existing differences between women and men without falling into the essentialism trap by suggesting the Sartre-inspired concept of seriality, has been crucial (Young 1994; Spierings, Zaslove and Mügge 2015). She developed an understanding of gender that integrates attention for social structure with the accommodation of various experiences of women, by proposing gender as an axis of social relations rather than an identity. In doing so, she made a theoretical opening for paying attention to intersectionality. She included a theorization of the three most important gender structures: sexual division of labour, normative heterosexuality and gendered hierarchies of power. Critiques of her work have pointed to unfinished business in conceptualizing better the relation of lived

bodies to social structures and the interaction between different structures of inequality at the macro level (Weldon 2008). Weldon suggests adding a fourth structure that she labels ‘nation making’, but this suggestion has not been taken up by others.

Other normative political theories may have serious potential in contributing to normative grounding of gender and politics’ understanding of gender equality, but they have been engaged with for rather brief moments of time, or only in limited works in gender and politics. Such has been the sad fate of the ‘ethics of care’ debate evolving out of Gilligan’s 1982 book (Tronto 1994, in which normative standards for a good and gender equal society were presented, even if Selma Sevenhuijsen applied this normative theory to very productive analyses of social policy (2003). Similarly, Amartya Sen’s theorization of justice as based on equality in capabilities has not been widely adopted, discussed and applied outside the field of gender and development (but see Robeyns 2003, 2007).

The past two decades in feminist theory have signaled that with the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), gender equality can no longer be just about ‘gender’. Intersectionality forcefully signals that gender is always shot through with power relations and structural inequalities relating to, for instance, race and ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, religion and class (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; Hancock 2016). The theoretical centrality of intersectionality has solved some of the feminist theory’s disputes, which related to questions of universalism, multiculturalism and relativism (see Squires 2013). In relation to gender equality, intersectionality has opened up the possibility for new insights and perspectives in the articulations of gender equality and, for instance, antiracism (Martinsson, Griffin and Nygren 2017: 9). Yet, the strong

position of intersectionality in feminist theory does not always translate into empirical analysis and leaves many practical questions and concerns in actual research conducted in gender and political analysis (Kantola and Lombardo 2017a).

In feminist political theory, there are many normative theories that offer quite operational concepts to ground understandings of gender equality and that, if used more empirically could provide a base for cumulative knowledge. In relation to theoretical work on ‘gender’, the focus on intersectionality and diversity has led to crucial questions about how to deal with the multiple meanings of gender equality; how to understand the nature of the relation between gender and other equalities: which claims to gender equality need to be based on racial and ethnic, class, and sexual equality or need to engage with discrimination related to disability and ageism. Other questions are still largely absent from gender and politics scholarship, for instance questions on how to integrate attention for gender identity issues when studying gender equality.

### **In conclusion**

We have argued for a restart of a debate on the very concept of gender equality. Sadly, the questions related to understanding the multitude of gender equality goals and how to understand this multitude theoretically seem to have drifted off the main agenda of gender and politics. At the same time, the contemporary context of the economic crisis illustrates the urgency of such project. The economic crisis has led to a backlash against gender equality and related policies across Europe. The crisis has also intensified different political projects, such as neoliberalism, conservatism, nationalism, populism, authoritarianism, whose consequences pose grave new dilemmas for gender equality.

The current context of the crisis then is bringing questions surrounding the conceptualization of gender equality forcibly to scholarly debates. With a different gender perspective, a different phenomenon is studied. When the analytical gender lens shifts from studying women and men; to studying gendered structures; to analysing discursive gender constructions; to understanding political and structural intersectionality; or studying affects constituting the crisis, the whole notion of the 'crisis' itself shifts (Kantola and Lombardo 2017b; Kantola 2018). The same is true in relation to 'gender equality'.

We have presented four ways in which researchers have dealt with the problematic nature of the concept of gender equality and outlined some of their weaknesses and strengths. We conclude that there are many valuable building blocks to be found in them, but that there is a clear need for a stronger and ongoing cumulative debate. First of all, there is a need for all researchers to be more precise in articulating the choices made in understanding or operationalising the concept. Cumulative debate is only possible when publications are more specific about their definitions and about operationalisations that have been made. This can and should include reflections on the contextual elements that have determined the choices made.

We have argued that the strategy of *escaping equality* - by using a variety of euphemisms - is merely a dead end, to the degree that it does not imply alternatives to the concept of gender equality for lack of articulating its motivations and choices. Moreover, in the current political climate of an economic crisis which has turned into a political crisis and a crisis of liberal democracy, this strategy might be beside the point

by failing to address deep flaws in democratic systems (think of ‘gender sensitising’ the Hungarian Parliament), or even dangerous, as their essentialist tendency can be easily picked up in gender stereotypical ways. Avoiding these euphemisms should not preclude the search for alternatives to the concept of gender equality though.

We contended that the strategy of *fixing equality* offers more specification especially in terms of issues that are seen to be crucial for gender equality, and as such enables comparative research, but that this still to a large degree overlooks the normative dimension of the concept of gender equality. In the current times of crisis and equality in recession, it might also be that this strategy lacks the flexibility that is needed to react to unexpected backlash.

We discussed the strategy of *deconstructing equality* as having the advantage that a wide variety of de facto existing understandings of gender equality can be exposed and analysed. We noted that the discursive analysis of gender equality is not always followed through to the point of deconstruction. We also critiqued this approach overall for its illusory pretence of staying outside of politics. Here too, we observed that the normative dimension of the concept of gender equality was largely ignored. In the current context of the crisis, this approach also runs the risk of normalising political understandings of gender equality that might become far removed from its feminist roots.

The last strategy we presented, *using normative political theory* has the advantage of tackling full on the normative dimension. In these current troubled times, with growing anti-gender campaigns attacking the normative foundations of gender equality by

terming it a ‘gender ideology’ (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) it is urgent to be better prepared to deal with the normative political dimension of gender equality. However, we observe that this strategy is not as strong as it could be – in fact, it is rather rare -, and that the debates about these theories are weak and not using the full range of theories available. Another problem could be that many of these theories are based upon an assumption of strong democracies, and that current democracies are weakened. There are thus two urgent needs: one to link empirical research on gender equality to feminist normative theory, and another to further explore and think through how feminist normative theory can be thought in de-democratising times.

Instead, gender and politics scholarship seems to have become trapped in a distinction between traditions that draw on ‘feminizing politics’ or ‘politicizing gender’ (Dean 2015). This distinction between scholars who focus predominantly on the gender dynamics of formal political institutions aka political representation of women (gendering political science and feminising politics), and scholars who study the politics of gendered practices in a wider set of domains (politicizing gender) is real, and there is a serious need to overcome it. But more is needed, especially in times of economic crisis. The crisis comes with more impulses towards intersectional inequality, favouring essentialist, one-dimensional and simplistic understandings of sex and gender, and even attacking gender studies directly. To truly address this, gender and politics scholars need to be more grounded in normative theory, paying more attention to anti-essentialism, anti-universalism and complexity of gender inequality, and transcending the distinction between ‘feminizing politics’ or ‘politicizing gender’ approaches.

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