

This is the accepted manuscript of the article, which has been published in **Jcms: journal of common market studies**, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13018>

Elomäki Anna and Kantola Johanna (2020). European Social Partners as Gender Equality Actors in EU Social and Economic Governance. *Journal of Common Market Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13018>

Accepted version

## **European Social Partners as Gender Equality Actors in EU Social and Economic Governance**

This article explores the role of a hitherto under-researched set of actors – the European Social Partners – in shaping the European Union’s (EU) gender equality policies and their framework conditions. The positions of the social partners are analysed across three key policy issues of importance to gender equality: the initiative on work-life balance; the European Pillar of Social Rights; and the European Semester. We argue that social partners play a crucial role in shaping in EU gender policy both within and outside social dialogues. They influence the form and instruments of the EU’s gender equality policy; shape the meaning of gender equality; and participate in the broader struggle between the EU’s economic and social goals which is crucial for the future of the EU’s gender policies.

Key words: social partners, gender equality, European Union, social policy, economic policy

### **Introduction**

The success of gender policies in the European Union has been mixed and subject to fluctuation. By the 2000s, EU gender equality policy had reached a state of professionalization, which consisted of five pillars: anti-discrimination law; positive action;

gender mainstreaming; funding; and action programmes (Jacquot, 2015). Gender equality had become enshrined in primary law as a key value and norm of the Union. However, the beginning of the economic crisis in Europe in 2008, and the ensuing euro crisis, saw the dismantlement of the EU's gender equality policies (Jacquot, 2017). Funding to gender equality programmes was cut (Jacquot, 2015); gender action programmes became weaker and diluted (Ahrens, 2018); and no new gender directives passed the legislative process (Jacquot, 2017). Mainstreaming no more informed the EU's long term economic strategies (Villa and Smith, 2014) nor the EU's austerity policies, significantly exacerbating the vulnerable position of many women and different minorities across Europe (Cavaghan, 2017; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Klatzer and Schlager, 2015).

The dismantlement of the EU's gender equality policy coincided with a further strengthened primacy of the EU's economic goals and policies over the social ones. Social issues, including gender equality, were subsumed to budgetary discipline, competitiveness and the correction of macroeconomic imbalances, with the new rules and instruments of the EU's economic governance playing a key role in this process (e.g. Crespy and Mentz 2015). In 2015, however, the European Commission took action to (re)develop a more social Europe and tackle the social side of the crisis in the hope having positive political repercussions as well. One of the chosen tools was the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), and after a decade of being sidelined, gender equality too re-appeared in the context of the Pillar.

These shifting relationships between the economic, the social and gender equality set the context for our article, which explores the role of a hitherto under-researched set of actors – the European Social Partners – in shaping the EU's gender equality policies and their framework conditions. Gender and EU scholars have long been intrigued by different actors'

roles and their impact on gender policy, and how their discourses and frames relating to gender equality have become dominant or marginal and with what effects (e.g. Ahrens, 2018, Rolandsen Agustin, 2013; Author 2, 2018), but they have seldom paid attention to social partners. By virtue of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the EU established a new playing field for trade unions and employer organisations through the practice of ‘social dialogue’. Since then, the EU-level peak organisations representing labour and management, exerted power over directives directly relevant to gender equality, including the rights of pregnant workers and to parental leave (Guerrina, 2005; Guerrina and Masselot, 2018). The social partners have also shaped wider economic and social policy initiatives which have impacted upon gender equality. We suggest the European social partners have become even more important for gender equality as the primacy of the economic in EU policy-making has sidelined traditional gender equality actors (Cavaghan 2017). Focusing on this group of actors helps to better understand not only the possibilities and blockages in European gender equality policy, but also the integration of a gender perspective in the EU’s economic and social policies.

We studied four key EU-level cross-sectoral employees’ and employers’ organisations that include the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Business Europe, the Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services (CEEP) and the SMEunited, which was called the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME) during the time of the research. We analysed their positions in relation to three key policy issues of the 2010s that are relevant for gender equality and are at the core of the broader struggles between the economic and the social: the ‘New Start’ initiative on work-life balance; the EU’s new economic policy coordination process

European Semester; and the European Pillar of Social Rights, with the following research questions: What were the key struggles related to gender equality between social partners in relation to the three issues? What were the differences and convergences between employers and trade unions? And, how did these differences and alignments affect the advancement of gender equality within the EU context?

Our findings are structured around key struggles around gender equality that cut across the three issues. Together they illustrate the multiple roles played by social partners in relation to EU gender policies. First, employees' and employers' organisations clash on the form and tools of EU gender equality policy, with the ETUC favouring legislation and being willing to bypass the social dialogue in order to overcome the blocking tendencies of employer's organisations. Secondly, the social partners take different sides in the broader struggle between economic priorities and the social dimension in European politics that sets the framework for gender equality policies, with employers maintaining the primacy of the economic and trade unions challenging it. Finally, the social partners participate in struggles about the meaning of gender equality through advancing gender equality narrowly as a labour market issue.

For mainstream scholars of social and economic policy in the EU, our work illustrates that gender equality questions are relevant to the work that social partners do, and sheds light on the political dynamics between the social partners and social dialogue. For the well-established scholarship on gender and the EU, our analysis sheds light on hitherto understudied powerful actors, and deepens analyses on the primacy of the economic over social and gender policy.

## **The struggle between the economic and the social: Understanding European social partners as gender equality actors**

In this section, we outline some key themes identified in earlier literature that set the context for our endeavour to study the European social partners as gender equality actors. These include, first, the long-standing struggle between the EU's economic and social goals, and the difficult position of gender equality policies and traditional gender equality actors due to the primacy of the economic. Second, we show the difficult position of gender equality vis-à-vis social partners both in the EU and national contexts.

The struggle between the EU's economic and social goals has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention. In addition to pointing out the 'constitutional asymmetry' between economic and social policies (Sharpf, 2010), scholars have identified several shifts in the balance between the economic and the social on the EU's agenda. In the 2010s, the economic crisis and the eurocrisis emphasised the primacy of the economic and the market-led integration and marked the 'further absorption of social policy into macroeconomic policy' (Crespy and Menz, 2015, p. 762). The primacy of the economic has been strengthened through the EU's new economic governance framework, where 'sound' public finances override social priorities and economic actors dominate (e.g. Copeland and Daly, 2015). The primacy of the economic is also discursive: within EU institutions arguments about social issues have to be framed in economic terms in order to be heard (Copeland and Daly, 2018, p. 1012-13). Other scholars have drawn attention to recent attempts to challenge the primacy of the economic, for example, some have pointed out the gradual 'socialization' of the EU's economic governance (e.g. Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018). Also the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) introduced by the EC in 2016 has been argued to have the potential to reshape

the relationship between the social and the economic on the EU's agenda as well as to contribute to the development of more socially just economic policies (Plomien, 2018, p. 282, p. 292).

The primacy of the economic in EU policy making has been described through various concepts, including disciplinary neoliberalism (Gill, 1998) and authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff and Wöhl, 2016). The term economization, used by Wendy Brown (2015) to describe the extension of economic priorities, values and practices into state and previously non-economic areas of life, provides a more useful analytical tool to understand the dominance of the economic in the EU's policies, governance structures, and discourses, as it refers to a process, not an end-state. Brown argues that as a consequence of the extension of neoliberal economic rationality, the distinctions between the economy, politics and society disappear to the extent that economic rationality gives a new shape and orientation to the state and finally constitutes subjects and organizes all spheres of life (Brown, 2016, p. 121). As efforts to strengthen the social dimension of the EU show, processes of economization exist side by side with efforts to push economic goals, principles, and discourses back. Economization is not a straightforward process but an object of a constant struggle, as different actors seek to either advance or contest the extension of economic priorities and concepts.

Gender equality occupies a difficult position in the context of the EU's economizing political agenda. Since the crisis, gender and EU scholars have drawn attention to the gradual disappearance of gender equality and critiqued the withering attention to social rights and gender issues (Jacquot, 2017; Author 2, 2017; Guerrina and Masselot, 2018). They have also revealed how the new governance framework sidelines gender equality goals and policies

and leads to gendered impacts (e.g. Klatzer and Schlager, 2015; Bruff and Wöhl, 2016). The austerity policies implemented around the EU in the aftermath of the economic crisis – often enforced by the European institutions – have been shown to be profoundly gendered. Low income and minority women have endured the worst of the cuts to public services and social benefits, and cuts in public services have refamiliarized and reprivatized care, reinforcing the unequal division of care responsibilities. (e.g. Bargawi, Cozzi, and Himmelweit, 2017; Rubery and Karamessini, 2014; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017.) At the same time, EU institutions are increasingly framing gender equality in terms of business and macroeconomic benefits rather than as an end in itself (Author 1, 2015).

It is our contention that struggles about gender equality at EU level, are therefore not simply about the content and visibility of gender equality policy, but as much as, and even more importantly, struggles over the balance between the economic and the social in EU policy-making, as well as about mainstreaming social and gender content into economic policy.

The European social partners representing trade unions and employers are of key importance in these struggles. As gender equality became subsumed by economic priorities, it became difficult for gender equality actors, such as civil society organizations and gender experts within and outside of the EU institutions, to have their voices heard in EU policy making. While shifts in EU economic governance have narrowed the space for democratic debate civil society participation (e.g. Author 2, 2017), gender equality actors have encountered severe difficulties in finding a common language with the EC bureaucrats who prioritise economic issues (e.g. Cavaghan, 2017). The priority given to economic issues, and the sidelining of traditional gender equality actors emphasises the role of other actors in

taking forward different gender equality agendas at the EU-level. We suggest that the main cross-sectoral European social partners – Business Europe, SMEunited/UEAPME, CEEP and the ETUC– are among the most important of these actors, because they have an institutionalized role in EU policy-making and because they are among the largest and most powerful interest groups lobbying the EU institutions.

Through the Treaty-based European Social Dialogue, the European social partners are consulted on new social policies, have the possibility to negotiate agreements, participate in regular talks with EU institutions, and take autonomous joint actions (European Commission, 2015). Social dialogue got a new boost, when European Commission President Claude Juncker announced ‘a new start for social dialogue.’ Among other things, new mechanisms have been created for more substantive involvement of European social partners in the EU’s economic governance (Sabato, Vanhercke and Spasova, 2017, p. 8-18). Social partners influence policies also outside the social dialogue, through lobbying the different EU institutions (Kluger Diogini, 2017; Treib and Falkner, 2009). Although the social partners are key power brokers in negotiating the relationship between the economic, the social and gender equality at EU-level, it is important to emphasise that the powers of social partners are not balanced. There is a distinct and observable bias towards business interests (Hix, 2005, p. 215; Coen, 2007, p. 335). Employers have also been able to constrain the level of ambition for social dialogue in the EU (Pochet and Degryse 2016, 7).

Traditionally, the relationship between labour market organisations and gender equality has been strained. The organisations, and the negotiation processes between them, have been marked by their overwhelmingly male presence and a correspondingly masculinized culture (Eurofound, 2014, p. 25). Labour market organisations have also been



shown to resist advances in gender equality in many countries (Koskinen Sandberg, 2016; Guerrina and Masselot, 2018). Furthermore, when the conflict between capital and labour becomes the key axis of confrontation, gender is often marginalized in negotiations (Saari, 2016). Although social partners are in an advantageous position to promote gender equality through their role in policy making and collective bargaining, in EU member states their activities have often revolved around campaigns and education that have rarely addressed the root causes of gender inequality (Eurofound, 2014, p. 2).

This is also the case at supranational level. European social partners have made several joint commitments to promote gender equality, such as the Framework of Actions of Gender Equality adopted in 2005. Gender equality has also been included in the joint work programmes of the European social partners (BusinessEurope et al, 2012; 2015). These commitments however, have led to no new EU-level norms since the revision of the framework agreement of parental leave in 2009. Rather, European social partners' joint work on gender equality has focused on the exchange of good practices. For example, the work programme 2015-2017 aimed at promoting work-life balance through a fact-finding seminar and exchange of good practices (BusinessEurope et al, 2015, p. 6).

One reason for these weak outcomes is that gender equality commitments are usually weaker within employer organisations than trade unions. This is evidenced for instance by the fact that internal action plans for gender equality are usually more developed among trade unions (Eurofound, 2014, p. 2), as well as by the efforts of employers to block or water down legislation (Koskinen Sandberg, 2016; Guerrina and Masselot, 2018). The weakness of employer's gender equality commitments raises questions about the direction of social partners' influence on the EU's gender equality agenda, in particular in a context where

economic interests have long been ascendant. Through analysing European social partners' policies and discourses on gender equality, we give a fuller understanding of the role that European social partners play in the EU's gender policy, as well as in sculpting the relationship(s) between the economic and the social in EU policy.

### **The three cases and research material**

This article focuses on three interlinked cases: a gender equality policy initiative; and two key economic and social policy processes that have significant implications for gender equality. The first is the "New Start" initiative to address work-life balance initiated by the European Commission in 2015 in order to replace the maternity leave directive that had been withdrawn after it stalled in the Council. The *Directive on work life balance for parents and carers* proposed in April 2017 and adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in 2019 is an important gender equality development after years of stagnation in the policy field.

The second case is the European Semester, the annual socio-economic governance cycle created in 2011, which has been criticized for strengthening the primacy of the economic over the social but also seen as a key arena for challenging this primacy (Zeitlin and Vanhercke, 2018; Copeland and Daly, 2018). During the process, the European Commission and the Council set economic priorities for the EU, assess member states' fiscal, economic, social and budgetary policies, and give policy guidance. The third case is the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), a key social policy initiative with potential to shift the balance of the economic and the social on the EU's agenda (Plomien, 2018). The Pillar, consisting of twenty principles and rights and four legislative or non-legislative initiatives, was proposed by the European Commission in March 2016 and proclaimed by member states in November 2017.

While both the European Semester and the EPSR are important from a gender perspective, gender equality has a vastly different role in them. The visibility of gender equality in the European Semester remains low, and the gender impacts of policy guidance are not assessed (Klatzer and Schlager, 2015). By contrast, and reflecting the idea that gender equality at the EU-level is considered a social, rather than an economic issue (e.g. Cavaghan 2017), gender equality has been present in the EPSR since the first proposal. The principles and rights of the Pillar include ‘gender equality,’ ‘equal opportunities,’ ‘work-life balance’ and ‘childcare and support to children,’ and work life balance (our case one – discussed separately because of its importance and because it was initiated before the Pillar) is one of the Pillar’s four initiatives (Plomien, 2018, p. 288).

The influence of the European social partners varies in the three cases. European Commission must consult European social partners when proposing new measures in the area of work life balance, and social partners were highly involved in policy-making both as partners and lobbyists. With regards to the European Semester, the involvement of social partners was initially low, but has increased since 2014. Recently, a number of formal mechanisms that involve social partners have been developed, such as ex-ante consultations and informal stock-taking meetings. (Sabato et al, 2017, p. 9-10.) In contrast, the ETUC in particular, had proactively participated in shaping the content of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The three cases are therefore of different importance to the social partners.

We focus on the four cross-industry social partner organisations: the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), BusinessEurope, the SMEUnited (at the time of research the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, UEAPME), and the European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services and Services of

general interest (CEEP). ETUC speaks on behalf of all European workers and its members consist of 90 national trade union confederations and 10 European trade union federations. BusinessEurope, whose members consist of 40 national business federations, is the main representative of business interests, whilst SMEunited is the European umbrella organisation for small and medium sized enterprises, whose around 70 member organisations consist of both national SME federations and European level organisations. CEEP represents the interests of enterprises and associations who provide public services such as healthcare, education, water, waste management, energy.

Our research data covers official written positions of the four organizations on our three cases (until April 2018). In addition, we have included all general statements on gender equality from years 2010–2018 to give a fuller picture of the social partners' positions on the field. The beginning of the research period was characterised by the initial fallout from the economic and euro crisis and the intensification of the EU's economic governance, but towards the end of the period social issues became more visible on the EU's agenda. The research data of 167 sources covers strategic documents, position papers, press releases, public letters, statements, and consultation replies (see Table 1). The material has been manually collected from organizations' websites between April 2017 and April 2018.

The documentary material is complemented with interviews with six persons working on gender equality issues within the four organizations (two from ETUC, one from SMEunited/UEAPME, one from BusinessEurope and two from CEEP), conducted between September 2018 and January 2019. We used a shared interview guideline for all, yet modified it according to the organization. We promised the interviewees a full anonymity. We use the

interviews as sources of background information about the negotiation processes within and between the organizations, but do not conduct a detailed analysis of the interviews.

Table 1: Research Material by Organisation and Case<sup>1</sup>.

Organisation	Work life balance	European Semester	European Pillar of Social Rights	Gender equality (General)	Total / organisation
BusinessEurope	4	9	7	8	25
SMEunited /UEAPME	5	8	9	3	22
CEEP	5	13	9	3	27
ETUC	7	34	23	19	81
Social partners joint positions	0	1	1	3	5
Employers joint positions	0	5	1	1	7
Total / theme	21	70	25	38	167

To explore the social partners' articulated positions on gender equality, we adopt a *discursive reflectivist theoretical approach*. Thus, we are less concerned with rationalist, actor-centred approaches, that place actors and their own interests at the core of the analysis (see Author 2, 2018, p. 331), and more interested to consider how the social partners'

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<sup>1</sup> One document may in some cases address more than one theme.

discourses constructed social reality, and to what effects. Discourses are closely intertwined with power relations, and dominant discourses tend to maintain existing power hierarchies in the society. Discursive struggles are hence power struggles over meanings of issues such as the “economy”, the “social” or “gender equality” and their mutual relations in society.

In relation to gender equality in EU policy-making, such an approach focuses on the ways in which norms – for example about gender equality – shape the EU’s policies. In relation to gender, it means asking questions about how the ways in which ‘gender is constructed in discourses and practices, privilege some representations of the problem/solution of gender inequality over others, and by doing so, construct subjects in specific gendered ways’ (Author 2, 2018, p. 331; see also Ferree, 2012; Verloo, 2007; Bacchi, 2009, 1999). Gender equality then, is continuously deconstructed, and reconstructed, in political debates and processes. In such processes of conceptual disputes, a variety of policy actors attribute a multiplicity of meanings to concepts such as gender equality, contesting them from their different perspectives (Lombardo et al., 2009).

In the following three analytical sections, we move on to our three cases – the work life balance initiative, the European Semester, and the European Pillar of Social Rights. We have chosen to not to analyse them one by one, nor have we organised the analysis by focusing on one social partner after another. Rather, in line with our theoretical approach, we have discerned three key struggles around gender equality that cut across the cases. These struggles, in turn, provide novel insights into the different roles that the social partners play in advancing gender equality concerns in the EU level. The first is the struggle about what form the EU’s gender equality policies should take and what tools should be used to promote gender equality. The second considers the struggle over the relationship between the

economic and the social on the EU's agenda, which is at the heart of any debate about the future of gender equality in the EU. The third struggle is about the meaning of gender equality. That is to say, about how gender (in)equality should be understood, and whose equality should be advanced.

### **Advancing and opposing gender equality policies**

This first analytical section focuses on social partners' struggles about what form the EU's gender equality policies should take and what tools should be used to promote gender equality. The overall picture that emerges is that the trade unions supported, and employers opposed gender equality reforms. For a more nuanced picture, we zoom in on the work life balance initiative, which, in fact, highlights differences between employers' strategies. Moreover, the case sheds light on the broader tensions relating to the role of social partners in EU decision-making and the future of social dialogue.

Responses to the two social partner consultations on the work life balance initiative launched in November 2015 and July 2016 respectively, illustrate the key differences between the trade unions and the employers' organisations. Trade unions were in favour of improving existing directives on maternity leave and parental leave, and introducing new directives on paternity and carers' leave. Questions about pay and funding were the key issue: ETUC argued that provisions on pay should be added to the existing directives and also that the new forms of leave should be paid. (ETUC, 15.1.2016.) The employers' main message was that no further EU legislation was needed. Instead they proposed taking stock of existing practices and exchange of good practice, improving care services for children and the elderly and awareness-raising, including challenging gender stereotypes. (e.g. BusinessEurope,

15.2.2015; UEAPME, 1.1.2016; CEEP, 4.1.2016). This was in line with the employers' positions on other gender equality policies throughout the 2010s: BusinessEurope, UEAPME, and CEEP had consistently rejected the need for new EU legislation (e.g. gender quotas for corporate boards) and called for a focus on implementation and awareness-raising.

The case of work life balance initiative, however, brings into light the different strategies of employer organizations adopted when facing proposals that they oppose. Whereas business interests rejected the Commission's plans by refusing to enter negotiations under the Social Dialogue provision of the Treaty (BusinessEurope, 15.12.2015; UEAPME, 1.9.2016), public sector employers were eventually willing to negotiate, despite their opposition to the proposals (CEEP, 29.9.2016).



After social partners' refusal to negotiate, the European Commission continued to prepare the initiative. The work-life balance package was published in April 2017 as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and it included the *Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers* (EC, 2017) which repealed the parental leave directive based on the social partners' framework agreement. The directive included new provisions on paternity leave, carers' leave, and called for the payment level of sick leave. While the ETUC applauded the proposal, the employers rejected the legislative aspects of the package. In a strongly worded press release issued a day before the Commission's proposal was published, BusinessEurope deemed the new legislation as a 'wrong approach', 'unacceptable', and 'ill-conceived' (25.4.2017). Additionally, UEAPME spoke about its 'disappointment' with the European Commission's approach (26.4.2017). The employers' key argument against new legislation was economic: extending family leave arrangements would be too costly for employers, too costly for the public finances, and detrimental to employment (UEAPME, 18.7.2017).



BusinessEurope (22.6.2018) even argued the directive sent the wrong incentive to workers by encouraging ‘more parents and carers, men and women, to not work’.

While the trade unions and employers’ positions on the legislative aspects of the work life balance initiative differed radically, they both emphasised public investment in care services for children and the elderly as a key element of better work life balance. BusinessEurope even stressed in its reflected position paper on the EC’s proposal that childcare and elderly care facilities is ‘where European and national policy efforts should concentrate to allow men and women to better reconcile work and family life.’ (Business Europe 22.6.2017). Interestingly, whereas the employers framed paid family leave as a serious threat to public budgets, they were simultaneously prepared to increase public spending on care services.

The EC’s work-life balance proposal provoked a bigger controversy about the role of social partners and Social Dialogue in EU decision-making. Our background interviews show that employers had already at the consultation stage been upset with the EC moving forward instead of allowing the social partners’ to discuss work life balance in the framework of the Social Dialogue work programme. The work programme’s diluted focus on fact finding and good practices (Business Europe et al., 2015) had been more convenient for the employers than the EC’s plans for new legislation. BusinessEurope and UEAPME framed the draft directive as a threat to the autonomous role of social partners, the future of social dialogue, and the wrong signal to send to the efforts to strengthen social dialogue. Also CEEP and ETUC saw the work life balance package as an indication that social dialogue was endangered. For them, however, the problem was not the European Commission’s proposal, but the private employers’ refusal to negotiate (ETUC, 25.4.2017; CEEP, 26.4.2017).

Our background interviews also confirm that the ETUC was frustrated with the employers' unwillingness to negotiate about binding measures and encouraged the EC to come up with a proposal instead of engaging in social dialogue. This strategy was successful and the ETUC had its lobbying points included in the package. In this way, the work life balance initiative was an issue where the employer's business interests were less powerful than previous research might have led us to expect, due to the EC being favourable to trade unions' interests (cf. Diogini, 2017). At the same time, the ETUC strategy of focussing on lobbying the Commission, put new strains on the social dialogue. The case of the work life balance also illustrates, how the social dialogue had offered the employers a chance to systematically dilute gender equality initiatives in this field.

### **Gender equality between the social and the economic**

The second struggle around gender equality between the social partners is the struggle between the economic and the social, which forms the framework of conditions for the promotion of gender equality in the EU. Trade unions and employers took different sides in this struggle, which is at the heart of their discourses on European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights. The social partners' positions on the two cases also reveal that they do not integrate a gender perspective into core economic and social policies.

The positions of trade unions and employers differed in both cases. In terms of the European Semester, ETUC did not accept the emphasis on 'the EU's damaging austerity regime' (16.11.2017) and cost competitiveness. Instead, it emphasised throughout the 2010s the need for more flexibility in the EU's fiscal rules, a stronger social dimension, for wage increases and public investments to drive growth, and quality jobs (e.g. ETUC, 30.9.2016,

4.11.2015, 30.9.2016). In contrast, employers emphasised competitiveness as the first priority, the implementation of structural reforms by member states and flexible forms of employment and deregulation as a path to more jobs (e.g. BusinessEurope et al., 15.10.2014, 7.10.2015). With regard to the European Pillar of Social Rights, ETUC focused on quality jobs, pay rises, new rights, fair mobility, secure labour market transitions, social protection and strong public services (e.g. 9.9.2016). Employers largely opposed EC's proposals on the basis that Europe is already social and emphasised employment creation and flexicurity (e.g. BusinessEurope, 24.8.2016). There were also differences between public and private employers, with CEEP adopting a more critical stance towards austerity, being more favourable to the EPSR, and emphasising public social investment more than private employers did.

The key theme that emerges from social partners' discourses on the European Semester and the EPSR, is the struggle between the social and the economic. In this struggle, trade unions and employers, and to some extent private and public employers, take different positions. ETUC, worried about the way in which 'economic considerations prevail over the social dimension' (22.12.2016), has consistently argued that economic and social factors are inextricably linked, and that the European economic governance needed greater social content. It emphasised that the social is as important, or even more important than the economic: 'Fundamental social rights must take precedence over economic freedoms. [...] Social rights must be promoted and defended with the same institutional urgency and commitment as economic and fiscal rules' (6.9.2016).

In contrast, the employers stressed that the economic should have priority over the social. They proposed, in line with the trickle down approach that has typified the EU's social

policies (e.g. Cianetti, 2017), economic solutions to social problems. This was exemplified by private employers' joint position on the EPSR, which portrayed economic growth, global competitiveness, and the expansion of wealth and employment as the optimal solutions to social challenges (BusinessEurope et al., 18.1.2017). In addition, in the spirit of neoliberal economization (Brown 2015) employers emphasised that economic principles and priorities, such as competitiveness, should also guide the EU's social policies (BusinessEurope et al., 15.10.2014). However, the employers did not constitute a unified front, as public service employers acknowledged alongside trade unions that there was an imbalance between economic and social priorities in the EU (CEEP et al., 20.1.2017).

The relationship between the economic and the social on the EU's agenda that the social partners thus participate in shaping determines whether, and how, gender equality is advanced at the EU-level. This relationship influences how much room there is for gender equality policy, as well as which gender equality issues are given priority, as topics with a clear connection to economic priorities, such as women's employment, are often favoured when economy dominates the agenda. It also determines whether gender equality is discussed as a human rights question and an end in itself or instrumentalized to economic priorities (see next section on this point). The (private) employers aim to maintain or even emphasise a hierarchy between the economic and the social, where gender equality either disappears completely from the agenda or can enter only in a narrow and economized way. In contrast, trade unions' call for a more social Europe shifts the framework conditions of gender equality policy on a more favourable direction.

Although the struggle between the economic and the social is important from a gender perspective, gender equality had only a marginal position in the social partners' positions on

the European Semester and the EPSR. The gender dimension of the ETUC's position on the EPSR was weaker than the EC's proposal. Although the ETUC referred in passing to some gender equality issues in its positions of the European Semester and stressed the need to pay more attention to gender in policy recommendations and assessments, the economic governance system itself – which feminist scholars have argued is based on masculine norms and resulted in gendered outcomes (e.g. Klatzer and Schlager, 2015) – was not criticised from a gender perspective. The role of gender equality in the employers' positions was even more marginal. It is arguable then, that despite their commitments to gender equality, the social partners did not include a gender perspective in economic and social policy debates that were part of their core agenda.

Despite the lack of explicit gender perspective, the trade unions' and employers' views on economic policies converged on one point that may open possibilities to move the EU's economic policies into more gender equal direction, namely the importance of investment in care infrastructure (cf. Elson, 2017). For the employers this was an economic question related to competitiveness and labour market participation (e.g. BusinessEurope et al., 15.10.2014; 7.10.2015), while the ETUC saw it as a question of social rights and the rights of the care workers (ETUC, 30.9.2016). Feminist questions about unpaid care work and social reproduction were absent from social partners' discourses. Interestingly, care infrastructure and child care in particular, were a more visible priority for employers, in particular for CEEP. In its economic policy positions, ETUC appeared more interested in employment-creating investment in general, than in challenging narrow and gendered ideas of investment that tend to ignore the economic contribution of the female-dominated care sector.

The invisibility of gender equality in economic and social policy debates thus had an impact on the battle between the economic and the social too. The marginalization of gender equality led to a narrow understanding of the economy, where the unpaid work and care mainly provided by women and the effects of austerity and EU economic governance on this work disappeared from view. Also the vision of the social dimension with which the ETUC challenged the primacy of the economic, fell short of taking into account the needs of different marginalised groups and addressing gendered power relations.

### **Narrow understanding of gender equality and inequality**

This third analytical section focuses on struggles about the meaning of gender equality. We contend that the understandings of gender equality and inequality that emerged from the social partners' views produce a narrow and economized understanding of gender equality through 'shrinking' and 'bending' its meaning to converge with their interests (see Lombardo, Meier and Verloo, 2009). This understanding is economized in two ways: it focuses on labour market issues, and gender equality is framed through business and macroeconomic benefits.

It is perhaps unsurprising that social partners should frame gender equality mainly in relation to labour market and workplace. However, such a focus on issues that fit with their core agenda produces an understanding of gender equality that is narrowed to labour market equality. This leaves important dimensions, such as gendered poverty and transgender rights, as well as the rights and needs of groups not attached to the labour market, unaddressed. One example of this is the way the ETUC's position on the EPRS focuses on 'a better deal for

*workers'* (9.9.2016). The implied claim here is that social security and public services are much less important than collective bargaining, pay rises, and working conditions. In turn, the key - perhaps even hegemonic - gender equality issue for employers, is increasing women's labour market participation. Equal division of care responsibilities and care services are seen as tools for bringing more women into the labour force, not as ends in themselves.

The challenge of the labour market focus is that – as feminist scholars have pointed out for decades now – gender equality in one sphere is always connected to gender equality in other spheres. Furthermore, the complexity of gendered power relations means that narrow understandings of gender and equality may, in fact, have detrimental effects to advancing gender equality. For instance, implicit assumptions about heterosexual nuclear families, lack of understanding of gender stereotypes or hierarchies, and lack of understanding how gendered power works in relation to interaction and communication are embedded in the proposed policies and may be further institutionalised.

There are many ways to frame gender equality issues, including women's and human rights perspectives. EU-level employers' organisations often promote gender equality issues in the wider context of diversity, which is the dominant means of discussing gender equality in the corporate world. This is evident, for example, in BusinessEurope's position paper *Promoting diversity in employment and workplaces* (5.11.2013), which outlines the 'business case' for diversity, and employers' positions on gender balance in corporate boards, where diversity is the key concept. The language of diversity is connected to the corporate-led diversity management approach, which has been criticized, amongst other things, for eliminating discussions on power and structural inequality, and for individualizing and depoliticizing gender inequality (e.g., Holvino and Kamp, 2009). Furthermore, the arguments

about business benefits that are intricately connected to the diversity approach subsume gender equality to private profit-making, which also legitimizes corporate capitalism (Roberts, 2015). Diversity-framing has succeeded in influencing EU-level debates about gender equality, in particular with regard to gender balance in corporate boards (Author 1, 2018).

In addition to emphasising business benefits, the employers have throughout the 2010s framed gender equality as a tool for economic growth and competitiveness. Although trade unions have a more rights-based approach, towards the end of the research period they have begun to frame gender equality in economic terms too. For example, ETUC's press release on equal pay from 2017 argues that '[a] pay rise for women would narrow the gender pay gap, and boost the economy by giving millions of working women more money to spend.' (7.3.2017.) The employers' organisations are therefore active actors in the economization of gender equality discourses at the EU-level, a development which has been criticized for depoliticising gender equality, the economy, and for legitimising the EU's gendered economic policies and policy goals (Author 1, 2015), and also trade unions have adapted their gender equality discourses accordingly. As the case of the work life balance directive reveals, the macroeconomic framing of gender equality can also function as a procedural *Gordian knot* by militating against further actions to promote gender equality.

The deeper outcome is that the understanding of gender *inequality* shrinks. Discussions about the gender pay gap illustrate how the employers' attempted to steer the debate away from awkward questions about gendered structures and power, and drive into the slow lane of individualized gender inequalities. Whereas the ETUC stresses discrimination as a key cause behind the gender pay gap (e.g. 29.6.2015), employers



downplay, or even deny, the role of discrimination and manoeuvre discussions toward gender segregation in education and employment - in other words individual choices and stereotypes influencing these choices (e.g. UEAPME 25.2.2013, Business Europe 30.11.2016; CEEP 11.6.2014). This has been identified in feminist research as a common discursive strategy among employers' organisations, to shift the responsibility of the gender pay gap to individuals and the wider society away from the employers (Koskinen Sandberg, 2016; Saari, 2016). The background interviews confirmed that employers' discursive struggles around gender pay gap - emphasising the meaning of gender segregation and STEM education have been partly successful.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have analysed European social partners as key gender equality actors, illustrating the different ways in which they advance gender equality goals or weaken gender equality policies and discourses at the EU level. Despite the direct and indirect influence of European social partners on the EU's gender policies and discourses as co-legislators and powerful interest groups, gender and EU scholars have seldom researched the roles of employers organisations and trade unions. Considering social partners as gender equality actors is all the more important in a political context, where traditional gender equality actors have been sidelined by the primacy of economic issues. Our analysis of three cases – the 'New Start' work life balance initiative, European Semester and European Pillar of Social Rights – reveals the social partners' threefold role: they influence the form and instruments of the EU's gender equality policy; they shape the meaning of gender equality; and they participate in shaping the relationship between the economic and the social on the EU's agenda.

We have argued in this article that struggles about gender equality at the EU-level are not only about gender equality *per se*, but about the relationship between the EU's economic and the social goals, and the concern to transform the EU's economic policies in a more gender equal direction. Our analysis uncovers how the struggles between the social partners around gender equality are embedded in the broader struggle about the relationship between the economic and the social. This struggle, where employers defend the primacy of the economic, and the trade unions advocate for the primacy of the social, is at the core of the social partners' positions on the EU's economic and social policies. It also shapes the social partners' positions on specific gender equality initiatives and their discourses on gender equality.

On a more concrete level, our analysis reveals the different and internally contradictory gender equality profiles of European social partner organisations. ETUC's commitment to gender equality was exemplified in the case of the work life balance initiative by their willingness to sacrifice social partners' autonomous negotiations over better gender equality outcomes through an EC directive. Yet gender equality concerns are marginalised in the ETUC's positions on key economic and social policy issues. Nevertheless, the ETUC's emphasis on the social dimension and efforts to transform the EU's economic policies towards a less austere and competition-oriented direction, do provide an equality friendly – although not a fully feminist – vision for the future.

In contrast, despite actively promoting and developing arguments about the economic and business benefits of gender equality, the three employers' organisations resisted any additional EU regulation in the field of gender equality, based ostensibly on cost-related arguments. While claiming to be supportive of the goal of gender equality, the employers

engaged in discursive struggles to make structural gender inequalities disappear from view by individualizing responsibility. Through emphasising the economic over the social, and arguing that economic goals should shape social policies, the employers presented a vision for the future where gender equality and gender equality policy are even more marginalized. Employers were not however, a unified bloc. In their critique of austerity, and a focus on social rights, public sector employers had greater affinity with the trade unions. Despite the generally bleak picture for gender equality, there was one issue where convergence between the trade unions and all the employers suggests the possibility of a new feminist alliance for a more gender equal Europe: public investments in childcare and other care infrastructure.

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