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ELOMÄKI ANNA

## **Economization of expert knowledge about gender equality in the European Union**

### **Abstract**

The paper analyzes (a) how the increasing demand for empirical evidence about economic impacts of gender equality transforms expert knowledge about gender equality in the European Union (EU) and (b) the implications of these transformations. The paper argues that the well-pointed out discursive economization of gender equality in the EU context is underpinned by the economization of expert knowledge about gender equality - the increasing reliance on mainstream economics to support gender equality claims. This has increased the influence of gender biased economics knowledge and its modes of knowledge production in EU gender equality policy.

## 1 Introduction

International institutions and organizations, governments, corporate actors, and civil society actors are increasingly relying on gender equality discourses focused on economic growth, human capital, efficiency, and corporate productivity (e.g., Prügl 2015; Elias 2013; Roberts 2015; Calkin 2018; Ferguson 2015). The proliferation of such discourses has been seen as one aspect in the neoliberalization of gender equality discourses and expertise. Feminist research has shown that framing gender equality as a contribution to economic growth, competitiveness, and business benefits “shifts” or “bends” the meaning of gender (in)equality in depoliticizing and individualizing ways (e.g., Rönnblom 2009). Such framings also co-opt gender equality to neoliberal capitalism, for example, through legitimizing neoliberal economic priorities and policies (Ferguson 2015), legitimizing corporate capitalism and private profit-making (Roberts 2015), and producing neoliberal feminist subjects (Elias 2013). The need to work with the “economic case” or the “business case” for gender equality has been argued to have co-opted and depoliticized gender expertise within international institutions and governments while, at the same time, providing new strategic openings in institutions otherwise hostile to gender equality (e.g., Ferguson 2015; Kunz, Prügl, and Thompson 2019).

This paper adds to the literature on the neoliberalization of gender equality discourses, policies, and expertise through studying scientific knowledge claims and modes of knowledge production that underpin the increasingly common arguments about the macroeconomic benefits of gender equality. My objective is to provide a deeper understanding of the gendered assumptions implied in these arguments as well as to

analyze the implications that the production of knowledge about macroeconomic benefits has for expert knowledge about gender equality. In this paper, expert knowledge about gender equality here refers to scientific knowledge and research rather than to the everyday “gender knowledge” about gender differences that shapes policymaking (Cavaghan 2017a) or “gender expertise” related to gender mainstreaming and gender equality policy implementation (Kuntz and Prügl 2019). This expert knowledge may or may not be feminist in the sense of having a connection to feminist movements or aiming to advance gender justice, and it can be based on different disciplinary standards, including gender studies and mainstream economics (Kunz and Prügl 2019; Kunz, Prugl, and Thompson 2019).

Arguments about macroeconomic benefits in contemporary discourses about gender equality have been backed up with the proliferation of economics research that provides quantitative, empirical evidence of these benefits, for example, through measuring how much women’s increased labor market participation would contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a given country or geographical area. A significant part of this research was initially produced or commissioned by international economic institutions, such as the World Bank, known for its “smart economics” approach to gender equality (Roberts and Soederberg 2012), and focused on developing countries and regions (e.g., Klasen, 1999).

In this paper, I analyze the production of scientific knowledge about the economic impacts of gender equality in the context of the European Union (EU) institutions. The EU’s gender equality policy has, since the very beginning, been underpinned by an economic rationale, and in past decade the EU institutions have followed the

example of international institutions such as the World Bank and explicitly developed and promoted arguments about the macroeconomic benefits of gender equality (Elomäki 2015). As part of this development, EU institutions and agencies have financed several studies about the economic impact of gender equality in the developed economies of the EU and its member states (EIGE 2017a; Eurofound 2016a; Löfström 2009; Smith and Bettio 2008), whose results have been visible in EU-level policy documents and political debate. The interest in producing scientific knowledge about the economic costs and benefits of gender equality coincides with the EU's new post-crisis economic governance and austerity policies, which have exacerbated the position of women and different minorities across Europe, enhanced the crisis of social reproduction, and weakened the EU's gender equality policies (Kantola and Lombardo 2017a; Jacquot 2017).

I analyze EU-level studies that produce knowledge about the economic costs and benefits of gender (in)equality in the broader context of the processes of economization, that is, the extension of economic goals, values, and practices to all areas of life (Brown 2015; Oksala 2013; Foucault 2008), and the increasing influence of economics knowledge and economists in society (e.g., Hirschman and Berman 2014). My analysis draws on feminist economics and political economy literature that makes visible the gendered biases of economics knowledge (e.g., Bakker 1994; Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas 2014). My main research question is: what does the demand for knowledge about economic costs and benefits of gender equality mean for expert knowledge about gender equality and what are the implications for the promotion of gender equality in the context of the EU's post-crisis economic governance? More specifically, I ask: how do the selected modes of knowledge production affect understandings of the economy and gender (in)equality and how do the studies negotiate with the gendered assumptions

of the economic knowledge paradigms upon which they rely on?

My analysis of the EU-level studies about the economic impacts of gender equality provides new insights about the neoliberalization of EU gender equality policy. It also contributes to broader debates about economic approaches to gender equality by analyzing shifts in expert knowledge about gender equality. The findings of this article suggest that the well-pointed out discursive economization of gender equality is underpinned by the *economization of expert knowledge about gender equality*. In this process, modes of knowledge production and expertise, as well as gender-biased discourses and concepts typical of mainstream economics, extend to the field of gender equality policymaking. A key outcome is that the range of human activities as well as issues related to gender equality that is analytically visible and intelligible and about which truth claims can be made is narrowed.

The article is structured as follows. I begin with the theoretical framework to understand the growing demand for research about the macroeconomic benefits of gender equality and its effects. This framework draws on literature concerning the influence of economics and economists in society and Wendy Brown's Foucauldian analysis of economization, and feminist economics and political economy literature on social reproduction. This is followed by a discussion of the research material and methods. In the first analysis section, I explore the type of knowledge produced in the studies and the ways in which the EU institutions legitimize this knowledge. I then move on to analyze the understandings of economy and gender (in)equality produced in the studies. The concluding section sums up the findings and reflects on the implications of the economization of expert knowledge about gender equality.

## **2 The power of economics and the economization of society**

Literature on the power and influence of economics has pointed out that since the innovations of national accounting and macroeconomic modelling in the 1930s, economics has played an important role in policymaking (Fourcade 2009). At the moment, societies are increasingly constructed, imagined, and governed through the concepts, models, and frameworks of economics (e.g. Birch 2017; Finlayson et al 2005; Hirschman and Berman 2014). Economics shapes society, among other things, through producing ideas and tools that are used in policy-making—for example, the idea that economic incentives determine individual behavior or tools, such as GDP and cost-benefit analysis. These ideas and tools participate in the governance of society and spread the economic mode of reasoning. (Hirschman and Berman 2014.) In other words, the ideas and tools of economics have an impact on what is seen as important and worth analysis, how societal problems are understood, and what kind of policy solutions are proposed. In this way, they can be argued to produce and maintain a particular form of social order and social relations. The influence of these tools is further emphasized by the professional authority of economists—the way economics knowledge is seen as specifically legitimate and relevant also outside the field of economic policy—as well as the strong institutional position of economists in policymaking (Hirschman and Berman 2014). In the past decades, the ideas connected to neoclassical economics, such as the aggregation of individual, rational decisions driven by self-interest into socially optimal outcomes, have been particularly powerful in global governance, national policymaking, and society more broadly (Finlayson et al. 2005).

The increasing power of economics should be seen as a part of a broader phenomenon: the expansion of neoliberal rationality. As Foucault and scholars building on his work have pointed out, the new science of economics played a key role in the eighteenth century in the emergence of neoliberal governmentality, which attempts to bring all aspects of life under economic rationality. This idea was taken to its extreme by the influential neoclassical economists of the Chicago School of Economics, who in the 1970s and 1980s generalized the form of the market to all social practices and institutions, including marriage and family (Foucault 2008; Oksala 2013).

Wendy Brown (2015) has used the concept of economization to describe, how in contemporary society and politics economic priorities, values, and practices are extended to heretofore non-economic areas. She defines economization as the “process of remaking the knowledge, form, content, and conduct appropriate to these spheres and practices (Brown 2015, 31).” Brown argues that as a consequence of neoliberal economization, the distinctions between the economy, politics, and society disappear to the extent that economic rationality finally organizes all spheres of life (ibid.) A key aspect of Brown’s Foucauldian account of neoliberal economization is its *constitutive* character. Economization constitutes individual and collective subjects, but it also influences how we see the world: what perspectives are understood as legitimate and what are understood as viable and rational political options (cf. Oksala 2013). In other words, when economic rationality begins to condition intelligibility, other ways to conceptualize and imagine the world disappear. Thus issues that cannot be expressed in economic terms are “divested of a place in language, visually and discursively absent from public consciousness” (Brown 2015, 106). In other words, processes of economization and the related influence of economics in the society transform the

boundaries of the possible.

It can be argued that processes of economization have intensified in the past decades. According to Brown the practices of neoliberal governance that transfer private sector management methods to the state and employ economic techniques, such as incentivization, competition, and best practices, have played a key role in the intensifying processes of economization (Brown 2015, 122–24, 135–41). Such neoliberal governance reforms have also contributed to the increased influence of economics in international institutions and in different national contexts, together with other factors, such as shifts within the economics discipline (e.g., the rise of microeconomics), market liberalization, and the increased authority of scientific evidence in policymaking (Fourcade 2009). The two processes support one another: economization enhances the demand for economics tools (e.g., cost-benefit analysis) and explanations of human behavior based on economic incentives, and the increased influence of economics further intensifies the expansion of economic values, priorities, and metrics.

The concept of economization and the literature on the power of economics help to understand the proliferation of discourses and scientific knowledge emphasizing the economic contribution of gender equality. All policy fields and areas of life, including gender equality policy, must demonstrate their usefulness to the economy. As part of this development, the knowledge typical to these areas is recast in economic terms, and the increasing authority of economics in all policy fields feeds into this development.

### **3 Economization as a gendered process**



In order to understand the increasing influence of economics in policymaking and society and neoliberal economization as gendered processes, I build on the insights of feminist economists and political economists. Even when neoclassical economic ideas have been dominant in economic institutions and policymaking more broadly, there have been critique and alternatives—even if often less influential ones—to these perspectives within these institutions and in the academy (Boris 2019; Folbre 2009). These scholars have pointed out that mainstream economic theories and models are based on gendered assumptions about what the economy is and how it functions as well as on a traditional understanding of gender roles (e.g., Folbre 2009; Nelson 1995). In the words of Antonella Picchio, “mainstream economics, on the one hand, at the macro level, does not take into account the processes of social reproduction that enable real people to live, work, and relate to one another in society; on the other hand, at the micro level, it has a very reductive idea of the individual: neutral, selfish, ‘autistic,’ disembodied and disembedded from context” (Picchio 2015, 250).

The concept of social reproduction, one of the key feminist concepts to challenge gendered distinctions of economics knowledge, is a particularly useful tool for analyzing processes of economization and the role of economics knowledge in these processes from a gender perspective. Social reproduction can be broadly defined as the material and affective everyday activities of maintaining life and reproducing the next generation—giving birth to children and raising them, caring for family members and friends, housework, and sustaining communities and connections in general—that have historically been seen as women’s work and that are still mainly done by women, often without pay (Bakker 2007; Hoskyns and Rai 2007). This work is necessary for the

functioning of the economy as well as for human well-being. Yet social reproduction is generally overlooked both at the level of economic theory and public policy, which focus on the so-called productive economy, that is, monetized exchanges at the market (e.g., Waring 1988). This non-recognition has made it difficult to set a value for these activities, compensate for their effects, and make them a collective responsibility, and it has further invisibilized social reproduction and its providers (Hoskyns and Rai 2007).

It has been argued that the tendency in neoclassical economics to explain gender differences through individual choices, capabilities, and preferences rather than structures, norms, and power relations (Nelson 1995, 137–38) is reflected in the economized gender equality discourses and policies of international institutions, such as the World Bank. Discourses that construct gender equality as a contribution to economic growth or business benefits rarely pay attention to structural aspects of inequality (e.g., Elias 2013; Roberts 2015; Bexell 2012). At the same time, these approaches give specific meanings to equality and other key concepts of feminism. For example, international institutions and corporate actors often frame empowerment in individualized terms, focusing on women's participation in the market economy as workers and consumers and representing women as rational economic decision-makers who are capable and responsible for their own empowerment (Kabeer 1999; Bexell 2012; Roberts 2015; Elias 2013). The focus on the market economy and women's waged work serves the needs of the global financialized economy. It is therefore not surprising that international financial institutions and multinational corporations have been instrumental in the development and dissemination of economic approaches to gender equality (e.g. Bexell 2012; Roberts 2015).

The concept of social reproduction deepens this feminist critique of economized understandings of gender equality. It is not only the structural gender inequalities that disappear from view; also, the gendered work of social reproduction is invisibilized when economic knowledge paradigms and their narrow views of economy and productivity are extended to all areas of life. For instance, mainstream analyses of the economic impacts of gender equality have tended to neglect women's unpaid work (Kabeer and Natali 2013; Braunstein 2008). From Brown's Foucauldian perspective, the stakes are even higher: when the economized language of competing capitals and responsabilized individuals begins to structure the way we see the world, social reproduction becomes unintelligible (Brown 2015, 106). This means that we might be losing the language needed to address social reproduction at the very moment when neoliberal, financialized capitalism and the withdrawal of states from public provisioning have increased the pressures put upon it (Fraser 2016).

While the concept of social reproduction helps to understand economization as a gendered process, it does not in itself provide an antidote for economization. Concerns for social reproduction and care have in the past been integrated into efforts to enable women's productive work and allocate women's work between the home and the market (Boris 2019). For instance, at the EU-level, discussions about the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities have been turned into efforts to ensure women's labor supply to support economic growth (Stratigaki 2004) while ensuring that women continue to reproduce the next generation of workers for the purposes of ensuring the EU's global competitiveness (Repo 2015).

#### 4 Research material and methodology

The gender equality policies of EU are supported with internal and external knowledge production. The policies draw on the statistics produced by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), the results of regular, Europe-wide Eurobarometer surveys, and the knowledge produced by the European Commission's permanent expert networks consisting of national experts. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) created in 2006 was tasked to develop and manage knowledge about gender equality, although with a technical rather than political mandate (Hubert and Stratigaki 2011). EIGE and other EU institutions often outsource knowledge production to private consultancies and research institutes—many of whom conduct gender equality research as part of a broader range of research activities—thus contributing to the marketization of gender equality knowledge and expertise (Ferguson 2018).

My key research material consists of four studies about the macroeconomic benefits of gender equality and/or the economic costs of inequality commissioned by different EU institutions and agencies between 2008 and 2017 and conducted by various academics, private consultancies, and research institutes. *Analysis note: Economic case for gender equality* (Smith and Bettio 2008) commissioned by the European Commission (EC) outlined the “economic case” based on previous research and did not provide new empirical evidence. The first attempt to estimate the effects of increased gender equality on economic growth in the EU was a study commissioned by the Swedish EU presidency entitled *Gender equality, economic growth and employment* (Löfström 2009). A few years later, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)—a tripartite EU agency —produced a study entitled

*The gender employment gap: challenges and solutions* (Eurofound 2016), which explored the economic losses arising from women's lower employment rate in the EU. The most recent and most ambitious of the four studies, *Economic benefits of gender equality* (EIGE 2017a), was commissioned by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The study, which calculates the impacts of increased gender equality on economic growth and employment rates, was the final outcome of EIGE's Benefits of Gender Equality project initiated in 2012.

In addition to the four studies, my research material includes the EU institutions' and agencies' background documents related to the studies (e.g., work programmes, annual reports, calls for tender, annual reports, n=19) and dissemination of results (e.g., press releases, videos, briefing papers and factsheets, website articles, n=18). These materials shed light on the rationale behind the studies as well as on how the EU institutions represent and legitimize the knowledge produced.

My method of analysis has two dimensions, focusing on discourses and concepts as well as modes of knowledge production. First, I utilize a discursive approach that pays attention to constructions of gender and the economy, the privileging of some representation of problems and solutions over others, and the construction of subjects in specific gendered ways (Bacchi 2009; Kantola and Lombardo 2017b, 331; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). Gender equality and the economy are continuously deconstructed and reconstructed in the produced expert knowledge as well as in the political debates and processes that rely on this knowledge.

The analysis of concepts and discourses is complemented with an analysis of how the

knowledge is produced. I see the theories, methods, and models used in the studies as modes of power and knowledge that shape our understanding of specific issues and constitute the field of issues that are analytically visible and intelligible. Attention is paid to how the chosen, historically constructed modes of knowledge production direct attention to specific issues while making it difficult to talk about others, and how they privilege certain truth-claims about these issues while effectively foreclosing others. I also ask what kind of power relations are imminent in this knowledge and where this knowledge derives its power. Combined with the feminist economics and political economy literature discussed in the previous section this approach helps to unpack the gendered assumptions and biases implied in the studies. It also helps to explain, why economized gender equality discourses and the scientific knowledge they rely on have become so authoritative.

The analysis that follows is divided into three sections. The first section sets the scene for a more detailed analysis of discourses and modes of knowledge production by exploring understandings of evidence, costs and benefits, and expertise implied in the studies as well as the way the EU institutions represent them. In the second and third analysis sections, I analyze in more detail what is at stake when knowledge about gender equality is produced with the tools and concepts of mainstream economics. I will focus on two issues: conceptualization of the economy and constructions of gender equality.

## **5 Empirical evidence of costs and benefits of gender (in)equality**

In this section, I explore the type of knowledge produced in the studies and the ways in

which the EU institutions legitimize this knowledge. I suggest that the studies embody the narrow notions of evidence as well as costs and benefits implied in mainstream economic analysis. The interest in the cost and benefits of gender equality shifts gender expertise at EU-level towards the discipline of economics, the authority of which is emphasized in the way the EU institutions represent the studies.

Based on the background documents, the rationale behind studying the economic benefits of gender equality and the costs of inequality was to increase the visibility of gender equality at the highest political level and advance gender equality in times of crisis and austerity. The Swedish EU Presidency's interest in gender equality and growth was connected to the aim to include a gender dimension in the EU's post-2010 economic strategy that was being negotiated at the time (Council of the EU, 2009a, 2; Council of the EU, 2009b, 1). EIGE's Benefits of Gender Equality project, in turn, was initially framed as a strategic effort to provide "convincing arguments and innovative approaches to advocacy and promotion of gender equality" (EIGE 2013, 5).

That emphasizing economic benefits was seen as the most effective way to promote gender equality can be seen as a way to counter resistance in hostile institutional setting (Ferguson 2015; Kunzt, Prügl and Thompson 2019) as well as a result of processes of economization: gender equality, as other policy goals, must demonstrate its usefulness for the economy (Brown 2015). The commissioning of empirical research on this contribution indicates, however, that it is not enough to discursively frame gender equality in terms of economic goals. In line with the ideals of evidence-based policymaking (e.g., Triantafillou 2015), one also has to provide empirical evidence of the economic impact of gender equality. The idea that gender equality claims and

gender equality policy should be more evidence-based was particularly visible in EIGE's Benefits of Gender Equality project, which was represented as an attempt to "prepare the ground for evidence-based advocacy of gender equality in the EU" (EIGE 2013, 16–17).

Reflecting the tendency of evidence-based policymaking to favor certain modes of knowledge production (Triantafillou 2015) as well as the special authority given to economics in policymaking, the evidence produced by the studies was connected to a specific mode of knowledge production typical of economics, namely, cost-benefit analysis. Cost-benefit analysis has become a common tool in government administrations to provide knowledge about the economic impacts of policies and assess their desirability (e.g., Hirschman and Berman 2014). According to the economic rationale that underpins this tool, monetized benefits of a policy should outweigh the costs, and options with the best cost-benefit ratios should be prioritized. The studies do not undertake standard cost-benefit analysis focused on policy options: rather, they assess the costs and benefits of different gender equality outcomes, such as women's increased labour market participation (EIGE 2017a; Eurofound 2016; Löfström 2009), the gender pay gap (EIGE 2017a; Löfström 2009) and the increase share of women among STEM graduates (EIGE 2017a). Yet the studies share the focus on quantified, monetized costs and benefits that is at the heart of conventional cost-benefit analysis. The emphasis on quantifiable, monetized evidence counters the way feminist theories and methodologies have expanded on what counts as evidence through new modes of knowledge production, such as ethnography, as well as shown that there is no such thing as "neutral" evidence.



This narrow understanding of evidence is linked to a narrow understanding of policy-relevant costs and benefits. Costs of gender inequality and benefits of gender equality for society and individuals could be discussed in various ways, for example, regarding human rights, well-being, and democracy. Feminist scholars have also pointed out the importance of measuring non-monetary costs, for instance the costs of increased social reproduction pressures experienced by individuals and communities (Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas, 2014). The struggles between economic and feminist understandings of costs and benefits are clearly visible in the background documents of EIGE's Benefits of Gender Equality project. Initially, the project's purpose was to explore both the social and economic benefits of gender equality and both qualitative and quantitative ways to measure them (EIGE 2012, 5). However, priority was soon given to quantifiable macroeconomic benefits (EIGE 2015) – against the advice of some of the experts and stakeholders involved in the early stages of the project (EIGE 2014, 8). The chosen focus can be seen to extend economic ideas of what constitutes a policy-relevant benefit to the field of gender equality policy, where policymaking has tended to be based on broader understandings of the public good.

The demand for empirical evidence of the economic costs and benefits of gender equality also has broader implications for the kind of expert knowledge about gender equality that is valued in policymaking in the EU. Gender experts working in global governance structures, such as the World Bank, have been increasingly looking for authority by drawing on quantitative knowledge that is considered as scientific and that employs positivist methodologies, such as economics (Bedford 2007, 297; Kunz, Prügl, and Thompson 2019, 911). At the EU-level, expert knowledge about gender equality has drawn on a wider range of disciplines and methods (e.g., EIGE 2019), but the

interest in economic impacts seems to have engaged economists and tools of knowledge production typical of the economics discipline in the production of this knowledge. For instance, the EIGE study makes use of a complex macroeconomic model that takes into account the relationships between various macroeconomic variables, such as GDP, employment, labor supply, investments, imports and exports, prices and wages, and consumption (EIGE 2017a, 13–15). Furthermore, consultancies focused on economic analysis have become engaged in the production of knowledge about gender equality. For example, the EIGE study was, to a large extent, outsourced to an UK-based consultancy firm, Cambridge Econometrics, which has limited experience in gender equality issues but owns and runs the macroeconomic modeling tool called E3ME used in the study (Cambridge Econometrics).

EU institutions legitimized this economized gender equality knowledge through actively disseminating the findings of the studies to media and stakeholders with press releases, blog posts, briefing papers, social media messages, and even interactive websites, infographics, and video clips (e.g. EC 2009; Eurofound 2016b; EIGE 2017d). Moreover, in these communications, the EU institutions represented the studies' findings as undisputable facts comparable to natural science – a common strategy to make economics appear as neutral and objective and give it a higher status than other social sciences (Fourcade 2009; Hood 2017). For example, the press release announcing the results of the Benefits of Gender Equality study draws attention to the quantitative character of the results and emphasizes the truth-character of the knowledge produced: “Now numbers talk. [...] We now have proof that gender equality is crucial for the entire economy” (EIGE 2017c, 1). The objectivity of the study was further emphasized by describing the results and the modeling tool with adjectives such as “robust” and

“credible” (EIGE 2017c, 1).

The way the EU institutions represented the studies and their findings thus draws on and reinforces the special authority given to economics and economists policymaking (Hirschman and Berman 2014). The way the results were presented can also be seen to construct an implicit hierarchy between economics knowledge and more traditional expert knowledge about gender equality. Representing quantified economics knowledge as scientific, objective, and incontestable implicitly casts other forms of expert knowledge about gender equality as more subjective, partial, and ideological.

In light of the above analysis and drawing on Brown’s concepts, I conceptualize the expansion of mainstream economics knowledge to the field of gender equality policy and the authoritative position given to this knowledge as the *economization of expert knowledge about gender equality*. This shift towards economic modes of knowledge production that is in line with global developments in gender expertise as well as with the power of economic in policymaking, is a shift towards more positivist, technical, and quantitative expert knowledge that emphasizes mathematical proof and causalities. It is important to recognize, however, that econometric models are not only technical calculation tools because they always rely on specific theories about what the economy is, how it works, and how individuals make choices. Both the models and the theories behind them involve gendered biases and background assumptions. I discuss these assumptions in the next two sections, where I look at how the studies conceptualize the economy and gender (in)equality.

## **6 Gendered understandings of the economy**

At first sight, the EU-level studies about the economic benefits of gender equality seem to challenge some gendered ideas about the economy. First, through emphasizing the relevance of gender equality for economic growth, the studies challenge the tendency to understand gender as a micro-level issue that is relevant only when analyzing individual behavior (Elson 1994; Cavaghan 2017b). Second, instead of emphasizing the short-term costs of specific gender equality policies—such as would be done in conventional cost-benefit analysis—the studies emphasize the long-term benefits. These representations of gender equality as an economically productive investment can be seen to challenge narrow and gendered understandings of what constitutes public investment (e.g., Elson 2017).

A closer analysis reveals, however, that despite these efforts to negotiate with the gendered background assumptions of mainstream economics, the studies reify gendered understandings of the economy and its functioning. The key problem is the neglect of social reproduction that has both a discursive and a methodological dimension. The studies try to make unpaid work visible in different ways, but there are inbuilt barriers in the chosen indicators and methods that prevent taking it fully into account.

Already the way social reproduction is discursively constructed contributes to its marginalization. Unpaid work is mainly framed as a hindrance to women's participation in paid work. For example, the Swedish Presidency study argues that “women's care responsibilities in the home affect their ability to work” (Löfström 2009, 31). The EIGE study, in turn, notes that “[w]omen are likely to undertake much more unpaid work,

including caring obligations for children and elderly relatives, than men. Therefore they participate less in the labour market and/or are forced to pursue a lower career profile” (EIGE 2017a, 26). Representations of unpaid work as something with economic value in itself or as something that sustains the productive economy are either missing or have a minor role.

The neglect of unpaid work also is fundamentally intertwined with the chosen modes of knowledge production. First, the neglect of social reproduction is enshrined in the key indicators of the studies. All studies measure economic benefits and losses in terms of the GDP, and the EIGE study also looks at employment rates. Their main argument is that the GDP grows when more women participate in paid work and are more productive in the paid work they do, and GDP growth further enhances employment and creates jobs for both women and men.

The choice of indicators is not neutral: it implies that increases in the GDP and the employment rate are relevant political goals and valuable to achieve. Feminist economists and political economists have criticized the GDP as a measure of economic progress, among other things, for omitting unpaid household and care work that increases well-being and is crucial for the functioning of the economy (Waring 1988; Hoskyns and Rai 2007). The GDP-centered approach means that the studies take for granted the mainstream focus on the productive economy comprised of monetized interactions. Unpaid work of social reproduction that not visible in the GDP is sidelined and not seen as a site where economic value is produced. Thus, the choice of indicators leaves intact and reinforces the gendered distinction in mainstream economics and policymaking between activities and actors that are counted as economic and those that

are not.

Second, the sidelining of social reproduction is implied in the econometric models used. As feminist scholars have pointed out, standard macroeconomic models often omit non-marketed activities, such as care (e.g. Caglar 2010; Nelson 1995). While the studies adjust standard models by taking gender into account—for example, through disaggregating employment and wages by gender—they continue to rely on gender-biased theories and assumptions of how the economy works. For example, although the model used in the EIGE study describes the relationships of tens of macroeconomic indicators and is even able to factor in environmental impacts (EIGE 2017a, 14-15), there is no room in it for taking into account the role of unpaid work in the economy. Despite being represented as “robust” and “rigorous” (EIGE 2017c, 1), the model used in the EIGE study is not equipped to take into account how the reproductive economy subsidizes the economy as a whole through making market-based activities possible and producing future labor supply.

The sidelining of social reproduction is most evident in the Swedish Presidency study, which almost completely neglects the question about what would happen to unpaid work if women’s paid labor significantly increased. The growth estimate of the study is based on the assumption that women’s employment rate would be as high as men’s and women would work the same hours as men currently do – which might be difficult without a significant increase of affordable care services for children and elderly. The study acknowledges only in passing that this scenario might have an impact on unpaid work, for instance, through pushing up demand for welfare services (Löfström 2009, 15).

The studies' focus on market activity neglects the long-term work by feminist economists to develop ways to measure reproductive labor and its value. Although feminist scholars' efforts to have unpaid work integrated into the systems of national accounts and the GDP have not been met (Hoskyns and Rai 2007), there have been signs of progress, such as the inclusion of unpaid reproductive labor in International Labour Organization's (ILO) definitions of work (Boris 2019). Moreover, feminist economists have developed innovative macro models that link the structures of paid and unpaid social reproduction to economic growth, thus acknowledging the economic value of social reproduction in macro-level modeling (Braunstein, Bouhia, and Seguíno, 2019). Some of these tools are put in use in the EIGE study, which calculates the monetary value of unpaid work and estimates how much this value would be reduced if women were to increase their paid labor. However, the discussion on unpaid work remains an afterthought buried in a technical background report (EIGE 2017a, 46-48).

It is not only the unpaid work of social reproduction that gets undervalued: the studies also implicitly and explicitly reinforce the well-recorded undervaluation of care work within the paid economy (e.g., Koskinen Sandberg et al. 2018). When the EIGE study measures how closing the gender gap in STEM education would increase the GDP and employment rates, it discursively constructs the STEM sector as more valuable for the economy than the care and education sectors where a large share of educated women work. The study refers to the increase in women graduating from computing and engineering as the "increase in the supply of high-skilled labour" (EIGE 2017a, 33), thereby linking the idea of high skills to the STEM sector rather than to care and

education. References to the “improvement in the quality [...] of female labour force” (EIGE 2017a, 67) imply that the quality of the female labor force would currently be low despite the fact stated on the report that, on average, women are more educated in the EU than men. A related assumption, most visible in the Swedish Presidency study, is that the workforce in male-dominated sectors is more productive than in female-dominated sectors: “Our scenario – a labour market in total gender balance – also proceeds from an assumption that many women are ‘transferred’ to more high-productive occupations” (Löfström 2009, 25.)

The studies’ narrow conception of the economy, neglecting and devaluing social reproduction, illustrates how the increasing reliance on mainstream economics to support gender equality claims may constrain what is seen as important and relevant and—more fundamentally—what is intelligible for us in the first place. The way social reproduction disappears from view is particularly worrying in a situation where austerity politics and neoliberal governance reforms refamiliarize and reprivatize social reproduction across the EU and globally (e.g., Bargawi et al., 2017; Kantola and Lombardo, 2017a), leading to a crisis of social reproduction (Fraser 2016). In other words, the economized knowledge about gender equality financed and promoted by EU institutions divests us from the language and concepts needed to understand the gendered effects of the EU’s economic policies.

## **7 Economized understandings of gender equality**

I will now turn from the constructions of the economy to the constructions of gender (in)equality. The impact of neoclassical economic theory is visible in the way the



studies frame gender equality and gender inequality. For example, the Swedish Presidency study describes gender equality as rational distribution of work. It also represents gender inequality as hindrance to productivity, echoing the way mainstream economics research often treats gender inequality as something that prevents the optimal functioning of the economy (Caglar 2010; Braunstein 2008).

When gender equality is present in the labour market, work in society is distributed rationally between the sexes. This means that a given occupation is allotted to the person most suitable and not due to prejudices or discriminating rules or practices. [...] If it is to achieve a high level of general productivity, a society cannot “afford” to discriminate. The female talent potential, therefore, must be tapped. (Löfström 2009, 8.)

Another example of the discursive framing of gender equality connected to neo-classical economics is the way the studies portray women as human capital to be tapped into. This framing, which has in the past years been commonplace in EU gender equality policy as well as in international development, is connected to human capital theory and has been seen as a key vehicle in the economization of gender equality discourses and policies (Calkin 2018; Repo 2015). Consequently, most studies interpret women's low labor market participation, despite their high education levels, as the failure of governments to get returns on their investments in women's education. For example, the EC study notes that “[a]ll Member States are willing to fund high levels of education for both women and men yet when it comes to allowing both women and men to make full use of these qualifications some Member States retain barriers that inhibit women's ability to deploy these investments” (Smith and Bettio 2008, 10).

In the studies, framings connected to neoclassical economic theory exist side by side with more feminist framings, for example, with references to gendered structures and norms. My analysis suggests, however, that the negotiation between these two perspectives is unbalanced, because the methods used to calculate the economic benefits as well as the theories behind these methods are not flexible enough to integrate feminist viewpoints.

First, the methods and models construct a narrow understanding of gender equality through allowing only a small number of gender equality issues to be considered. Mainstream economists' efforts to estimate the effects of gender equality on economic growth have been criticized for focusing on a limited number of measures of gender equality—mainly, education and employment (Kabeer and Natali 2013). This is also the case with the EU-level studies, which mainly focus on employment-related issues, complemented with the focus on STEM education in EIGE study. When the EU institutions argue based on the studies that “[g]ender equality boosts economic growth” (EIGE 2017c, 1) or that “[g]ender equality could boost economic growth up to 45% of GDP” (EC 2009, 1), they operate on a narrow and economized understanding of gender equality reduced to equal amounts of work and equal productivity understanding that suits well to the needs of neoliberal capitalism.

The studies give some reasons for the narrow range of issues chosen. The Swedish Presidency study acknowledges that it is not possible to find a clear connection between economic growth and all gender equality issues (Löfström 2009, 8), and the EIGE study points out that it is not possible to evidence all social and economic impacts of gender equality at the macroeconomic level (EIGE 2017a, 16). A closer look at the model used

the EIGE study reveals why this is the case. In order to be factored into the model, a gender equality issue would have to be connected to macroeconomic indicators, such as employment, productivity, wages, and prices. It is not evident, how this could be done for issues, such as gender equality in decision-making or transgender rights. What happens is that gender equality issues that do not have an obvious connection to economic growth or that cannot be fit into macroeconomic models disappear from view.

Second, when the gender equality issues included in the studies are translated into the macroeconomic language of labor supply and productivity, their meaning is radically transformed. For example, the EIGE study turns the issues of unequal division of unpaid work between women and men—a key issue from the perspective of social reproduction—into a question of fertility and thereby an issue of labor supply: a more equal division of unpaid work is assumed to increase fertility which, in turn, increases consumption and future labor supply (EIGE 2017a, 29–30). The focus on fertility—also present in the EC analysis note—shows that the EU's neoliberal vision for a productive and competitive Europe expects women to bring their labor and human capital to the labor market while at the same time continuing to reproduce the next generation of workers (Repo 2015, 154).

When complex issues connected to gendered power relations are translated into the language of labor supply and productivity, power relations and structural inequalities are legitimized or become invisible. The most striking example of this is how the Swedish Presidency study interprets gender pay gap as a difference in productivity: men's higher wages are seen to reflect their higher productivity. In this scheme, bridging the gender pay gap increases growth because women's productivity catches up with

men's productivity (Löfström 2009, 15). This framing legitimizes the idea, often heard in public debate, that care work typically performed by women in the public sector is less productive than work in the private sector, for instance, in the construction industry, and therefore deserves lower pay. Turning the gender pay gap into a difference in productivity makes the structural undervaluation of feminized paid care work (Koskinen Sandberg et al. 2018) disappear from view.

In sum, it appears that, despite efforts to negotiate some of the gender biases of mainstream economic theory, the studies carry within them many of its problematic understandings about gender equality and inequality. In my analysis, a key reason for this is that in the framework of the methods, models, and theories used in the studies, gender (in)equality is analytically visible and intelligible only to the extent it can be translated into a question of labor supply and productivity. The economization of expert knowledge about gender equality—the increasing reliance on mainstream economics to support gender equality claims—anchors the narrow and depoliticized understandings of gender equality typical of economized discourses in the more fundamental level of truth claims through restricting the range of gender equality issues of which knowledge can be produced.

## **8 Conclusions**

In this paper, I have analyzed, using a European Union (EU) focus, the knowledge and modes of knowledge production that underpin the increasingly common arguments about the economic benefits of gender equality and the economic costs of inequality. I have argued that the growing demand for and production of empirical evidence of the economic costs and benefits extends mainstream economics knowledge and its modes

knowledge production, concepts, and understandings to gender equality policy. I have called this development, which echoes trends in global governance (Kunz, Prügl, and Thompson 2019), the economization of gender equality knowledge and expertise. Also, I have placed it in the context of the increasing influence of economics in policymaking and society (Hirschman and Berman 2014), as well as the extension of economic priorities, goals and practices to all areas of life (Brown 2015). Economization moves expert knowledge about gender equality into a more positivist direction. Furthermore, economized knowledge carries within it the gender biases of mainstream economic theory. The EU institutions that have financed, produced, and promoted this kind of research have been key drivers in the economization of gender equality knowledge in the EU.

My analysis of the discourses and modes of knowledge production of four studies commissioned and financed by EU institutions between 2008 and 2017 reveals that although the studies try to negotiate with the gendered background assumptions of mainstream economic theory, the methods, models, and theories used to calculate the economic impact of gender equality reproduce narrow and gendered understandings of the economy and economically valuable activity, narrowing and economizing understandings of gender equality and inequality. The work of social reproduction mainly done by women and the costs related thereto disappear analytically from view because the models and methods used do not account for the role and value of social reproduction in the economy. Also the narrow understandings of gender equality as labor market participation that frame women as human capital and serve the needs of financialized capitalism are connected to the chosen modes of knowledge production connected to the economics discipline.

I have suggested that a key outcome of the economization of expert knowledge about gender equality is not as much a shift in what is seen as politically relevant as it is a shift in what aspects of gender equality and human activities are analytically visible and intelligible for us. The reliance of mainstream economics to support gender equality claims restricts the range of issues from which knowledge can be produced and, thereby, has an impact on the kind of truth-claims that can be made about the gendered structures of the economy and gender equality.

These concerns are particularly pressing because economized knowledge about gender equality may, in line with the special authority given to economics knowledge, be seen as a more reliable and desirable starting point for policymaking than other forms of expert knowledge about gender equality. When economized knowledge about gender equality becomes embedded in policy processes, this may direct public and political attention and restructure policy initiatives. Most importantly, economization of gender equality knowledge may make it harder to account for the gendered effects of austerity and neoliberal governance reforms, such as the increasing strain that cuts in public spending and the marketization and privatization of public services put on social reproduction and care, and to tackle the crisis of social reproduction (Fraser 2016). The economization of gender equality knowledge deprives us of the concepts and analytical frameworks needed to understand the effects of these changes. It also makes social reproduction as well as the persons who most suffer from the increased burdens put upon it invisible.

Studies about the economic costs and benefits of gender (in)equality that provide

empirical evidence in support of the economic case for gender equality may also open new doors for gender equality policy. This applies to environments hostile to rights-based gender equality claims (e.g., Ferguson 2015) as well as to contexts where policy-making processes give priority to quantitative and monetized knowledge and where economics carries more weight than feminist and gender studies (Ylöstalo 2020). However, even in this case it is important to be aware of the gendered background assumptions implicit in such studies. Revealing these assumptions may eventually help us to understand how economized gender equality discourses and the knowledge that they rely on can be contested. Although the recognition of the role and value of social reproduction in the economy should have an important role in this contestation, this alone is not enough to stop or reverse broader processes of economization in society and politics.

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