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FROM PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY TO MANAGING GENDER EQUALITY POLICY

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Abstract: This article analyzes the depoliticizing effects of managerial public governance reforms to gender equality policy. It combines two dimensions of depoliticization: the denial of gendered power relations and the denial of political interests, ideologies and related conflicts. The article focuses on a recent strategic governance reform in Finland, in order to pay attention to the context-specificity of governance reforms as well as how they are connected to 'management fashions.' The article shows how the implementation of strategic governance has intensified the ongoing shifts in the position, scope and practices of gender equality policy. As a result, gender equality policy has been sidelined and instrumentalized to serve other government policy objectives; the scope of gender equality policy has been narrowed, and the measures to promote gender equality have become increasingly aligned with the ideals and practices of managerial governance. The article argues that the two-dimensional process of depoliticization explains a 'quiet backlash' of gender equality policy in a context of relatively strong gender

equality policy and institutions. Such backlash does not involve an open conflict between gender equality policy and conservative and/or anti-gender policies, but is represented as a technical rather than a political shift.

Keywords: gender-equality policy; managerial governance; governance; depoliticization; backlash

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality goals and policies have in the past decade been contested across the globe, for instance through the rise of the Global Right (e.g. Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019) and neoliberal restructuring, with different dynamics in different geographical and economic contexts. In Europe, the context of this paper, austerity politics and the increasing influence of right-wing populism and conservatism and the related anti-gender views have had a negative impact on public gender equality policy and led to the closing or defunding of gender equality bodies, the sidelining of gender equality as a political goal, and the withdrawal of gender equality initiatives (e.g., Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Krizan and Roggeband 2018; Harris Rimmer and Sawer 2016). This visible backlash against gender equality policy has taken place along with the intensification of longstanding transformations of state and governance that have already for several decades influenced the form and content of gender equality policy from Australia to South America to Europe (Kantola and Squires 2012; Rönnblom et al. 2017). These shifts in gender equality policy that are related to neoliberalism understood as a form of

governance have been described variously as a shift from state feminism to market feminism (Kantola and Squires 2012) or governance feminism (Halley et al. 2018).

Our article contributes to the ongoing discussions on the neo-liberalization of gender equality policy both empirically and theoretically. First, the article provides new empirical knowledge on the effects of a recent and under-researched managerial reform agenda on gender equality policy, namely, the discourse on strategic public governance and the related reforms. This reform agenda has recently been advocated by various policy actors, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD. Secondly, the article develops feminist theorizing of managerial governance and its effects on gender equality policy. It provides theoretical tools for understanding the depoliticizing effects of managerial public governance reforms that transfer private sector management practices to gender equality policy.

We analyze the effects of the managerial governance reforms on gender equality policy in Finland, an OECD and European Union country with a strong state feminist tradition and eagerness for neoliberal governance reforms. Finland has for decades had active gender equality policy and relatively strong institutional mechanisms for gender equality, but gender equality policies have nevertheless always been contested (e.g., Holli 2003; Holli and Kantola 2007). In Finland the recent global backlash manifested itself in further contestation of gender equality goals and policies, fueled by neoliberal economic policies as well as the increasing presence of conservatism and nationalism in political and public debate (Elomäki and Kantola 2018). Since the 1980s, Finland, like many other countries in Europe and globally, has actively embraced

various neoliberal governance reforms, such as new public management, privatization of state functions, marketization of public services, and reforms enhancing budget discipline (e.g., A. Kantola and Kananen 2013; Yliaska 2015). Finland has been eager to adopt global 'management fashions' in state governance (e.g., Kantola and Seeck 2011), and in this article, we focus on governance reforms implemented in the 2010s that have aimed at improving the government's strategic vision and its implementation. Finland makes an interesting case for analysis because of the tension between its relatively strong gender equality policies and institutions and its eagerness for neoliberal governance reforms.

Our theoretical framework links feminist literature on state transformation and governance (e.g., Kantola and Squires 2012; Prugl 2011; Rönnblom et al. 2017) with 'mainstream' political science literature on managerial governance and depoliticization (e.g., Fawcett et al. 2018; A. Kantola and Seeck 2011; Wood and Flinders 2014), with the aim of understanding the different depoliticizing effects of managerial governance in relation to gender equality policy. Many of the earlier analyses of neo-liberalization of gender equality policy have focused on discourses and the framing of gender equality (e.g., Lombardo et al. 2009), actors (e.g., Outshoorn and Kantola 2007), policy measures and themes (e.g., Harris Rimmer and Sawer 2016), or practices such as gender mainstreaming or gender budgeting (e.g., Bacchi and Eveline 2003; Marx 2019; Prugl 2011). In contrast, we focus on what we call the *form* of gender equality policy. By form we refer to a broad range of practices and features related to the governance of gender equality policy as a distinct policy area, such as the steering tools, the scope of policy, the type of measures implemented, and the relationship to other policy areas. Analyzing shifts in form rather than in content sheds light on dynamics of neoliberalization that have not been visible in earlier

research. Our research questions are: How have managerial governance reforms influenced the form of Finland's gender equality policy in the 2000s? In what ways are these shifts depoliticizing, and how have they affected the transformative potential of gender equality policy?

The article is structured as follows. We first develop our theoretical framework for analyzing gendered and depoliticized managerial governance, and then introduce the Finnish context and our research material. The following analytical sections focus on three key shifts we identify in the form of Finnish gender equality policy: i) the instrumentalization and sidelining of gender equality policy; ii) the narrowing of gender equality policy and iii) the bureaucratization of gender equality policy. In the conclusions we reflect on how changes in governance practices and discourses have opened a window for opportunity for those with anti-feminist aspirations to push gender equality off the political agenda, making the sidelining of gender quality appear as a technical rather than political question.

GENDERED AND DEPOLITICIZED MANAGERIAL GOVERNANCE

In this section we develop further feminist theorizing of managerial governance and the effects of managerial governance on gender equality policy. Our discussion centers around the concept of depoliticization and draws on feminist literature on state transformation and neoliberal

governance, as well as on political science literature on managerial governance and depoliticization.

The extensive body of feminist research on the effects of state transformation and neoliberal governance in different national contexts has demonstrated how these processes have changed the priorities, discourses, actors and practices of gender equality policy. Themes that support economic goals have been prioritized, gender equality is increasingly represented as a contribution to economic growth, competitiveness and business profitability (Elomäki 2018; Roberts 2015), and private and third sector actors have become key partners of states in promoting gender equality (e.g., Kantola and Squires 2012; Olivius and Rönnblom 2019). Meanwhile, the tools and techniques that follow the logic of neoliberal governance—audits, best practices, gender mainstreaming, gender impact assessment and indicators—have become central in gender equality policy, making gender equality policy a technocratic, administrative enterprise (e.g., Marx 2019; Prugl 2011; Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016).

Building on and adding to this literature, we focus on the effects of a specific governance reform agenda, that is, recent efforts to make governments and policy-making processes more strategic. In our view, focusing on specific reforms and discourses is important, because public governance is affected by constantly changing 'management fashions' connected to private sector trends (A. Kantola and Seeck, 2011) that have specific characteristics and specific effects on gender equality policy. As processes of neoliberalism take different forms in different geographical

contexts (e.g., Peck and Tickell 2002), it is important to analyze these effects in a specific national context.

The view that public governance should not only be more effective, but also more strategic gained some attention in the context of the new public management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, and that notion has reappeared in debates about public governance in the 2010s. One of the key actors behind the reappearance of this view was the OECD, which adapted the concept of 'strategic agility' from business management literature to public governance (OECD 2010). In Finland, the geographical location of this paper, strategic governance has been the aim of several central government reforms since the 1990s (Mykkänen 2016). The most substantial reform in this regard has been the strategic governance reform implemented by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's government (2015–2019) at the beginning of its term; that not only changed the format of government talks and the form of the government program as well as its implementation process, but also the way policy areas such as gender equality policy are steered (Elomäki 2019; Elomäki et al. 2016; Mykkänen 2016). One of the most visible concrete changes was that the government set a long- and short-term 'strategic vision' for Finland and organized its work around a limited number of horizontal 'strategic objectives' as well as 'key projects' to reach these objectives. Leading politicians discursively constructed the new way of working as a collegial effort to set political differences aside in order to work together as a team for a common goal (Elomäki 2019). The reform was inspired by the OECD's and the national think tank Sitra's work on 'strategic agility' (Doz and Kosonen 2014; OECD 2010).

We understand the discourse on strategic governance and the related context-specific reforms as a form of managerialism and managerial governance (e.g., Newman and Clarke 1997; Klikauer 2015; Sorensen and Torfing 2018). Managerialism is a concept that is close to new public management (NPM) and has been seen as an ideology that perceives management and managers as key to organizations' success and extends concerns, practices, structures and processes of corporate management to other organizations (e.g., Klikauer 2015). In the public governance context, managerialism and managerialist discourses have been argued to provide pragmatic and technical solutions to what were previously considered as political problems (A. Kantola and Seeck 2011; Newman and Clarke 1997; Sorensen and Torfing 2018).

Managerial governance is deeply entrenched with processes of depoliticization, and the concept of depoliticization provides a useful tool for analyzing the effects of strategic governance on gender equality policy. We suggest that in order to fully understand these effects, it is important to combine feminist literature on the depoliticizing effects of neoliberal governance with political science literature on managerial governance and depoliticization. From feminist literature we take on board the understanding of depoliticization as the denial of gendered power, whereas the literature on managerial governance and depolitization draws attention the more general denial of political interests and ideologies. We see these understandings as two intertwined and complementary dimensions of depoliticization, which both are connected to the expulsion of conflicts and contestation from politics (Mouffe 2005; 2013). By using the term *denial* to describe these dimensions, we emphasize that depoliticization does not remove power and politics from the issues and processes of concern (cf. Wood and Flinders 2014, 155). In other words, depoliticization is a deeply political process.

The idea of depoliticization has had a key role in feminist analyses of how neoliberal governance has decreased the transformative potential of gender equality policy. In these analyses, the concept has been used to describe various phenomena. These include the sidelining of feminist movements and feminist knowledge from policy-making (Ylöstalo 2020), problem representations that draw attention away from structural inequalities and power (Elomäki 2018), and the way the focus on specific techniques and tools has pushed discussions on gender equality goals and gender inequalities to the background (Alnebrett and Rönnblom 2016; Prügl 2011; Marx 2019). We suggest that these discussions shed light on a specific dimension of depoliticization: the denial of gendered power relations. This dimension has been most thoroughly theorized by Rönnblom, who has argued that in the logic of neoliberal policies and governance, gender is no longer addressed in terms of conflictual interests and societal power relations (Rönnblom 2017). The denial of gendered power can be discoursive, for instance, when gender equality problems are represented in economic terms (e.g., Elomäki 2018). It can also be an outcome of governance practices, for example, when the implementation of different governance tools, such as gender mainstreaming, becomes a goal in itself (Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016).

The feminist analysis of gendered power alone is not enough to grasp the depoliticizing effects of the strategic governance reforms in relation to gender equality policy. The political science debates on managerial governance and depoliticization help to understand the broader depoliticizing shifts in public governance, which shape the context in which gender equality

policies are adopted and implemented. In these debates, depoliticization is often discussed in terms of the denial of political interests and ideologies, as well as the related sidelining of antagonism and conflicts (e.g., Fawcett et al. 2018; Flinders and Wood 2014; A. Kantola and Seeck 2011).Tthe denial or sidelining of political interests, ideologies and conflicts has been shown to be at the heart of managerial governance practices and discourses. Managerialism is often represented as rational and value neutral, and the applied management principles as unquestioned, common-sense truths (Klikauer 2015). The focus on searching for technical and practical solutions sidelines the political and contested character of the problems and solutions at hand. Political interests and ideologies are marginalized when managerial governance offers civil servants and politicians the role of neutral business managers or leaders (Newman and Clarke 1997; A. Kantola and Seeck 2011). As Eva Sorensen and Jacob Torfing (2018: 37) have put it, in managerialist governance discourses "the focus on politics, power, and democracy is replaced with a focus on management, coordination, and effective problem-solving." This general denial of interests, ideologies and conflicts is our second dimension of depoliticization.

Our two-dimensional conception of depoliticization as the denial of gendered power relations and the more general denial of interests, ideologies and conflicts makes visible, how the denial of gendered power takes place in a context, where the space for societal and political conflicts has in general been reduced. Thus, the general denial of interests, ideologies and conflicts, characteristic of managerial governance, enables the sidelining of gendered power relations – and gender equality policy more broadly. By using this two-dimensional conceptualization of depoliticization in our analysis we will show how specific managerial governance reforms, such as strategic governance reforms, have both general and gender-specific depoliticizing effects, and how these effects are intertwined.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH MATERIAL

At the beginning of the 2000s, which was the beginning of our research period, the institutions of Finnish gender equality policy had just been reorganized and strengthened and reached their current form (Holli and Kantola 2007). The policy was shifting towards a twin-track approach, where gender equality was promoted through specific measures as well as through gender mainstreaming (Saari 2012). Gender equality policy also received a new steering tool, the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality, a multiannual policy document that governments use to state their gender equality goals and list their measures to promote gender equality. The Action Plans do not have specific funding or human resources, and the government's Gender Equality Unit is in charge of monitoring their implementation. The first Action Plan of this format was adopted by a centre-left government in 2004.

In the 2010s, gender equality policy entered a new phase that has been characterized by a change of direction (Elomäki and Kantola 2018). After the 2008 financial crisis, Finland fell into a deep and long recession, and following that governments adopted a series of austerity measures and other neoliberal economic policies with gendered effects. The political context was also underpinned by the rise of conservatism and nationalism, and conservative views on gender and family as well as anti-feminism gained visibility in political debate (ibid.). Gender equality policy visibly weakened especially under Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's (Centre Party) right-conservative-populist government (2015–2019), which also implemented the strategic governance reform discussed in the previous section. The 2015 government program was the

first in 20 years that did not set gender equality goals and measures. Feminist commentators criticized the government's Action Plan for Gender Equality (2016–2019) for neglecting the gendered effects of austerity and for sidelining some of the long-standing goals of Finnish gender equality policy (e.g., Elomäki et al. 2016; Hirvonen and Mankki 2016.)

In this article, we look beyond austerity and conservatism as possible reasons for the weakening of gender equality policy, and make visible the role that changes in public governance have played in this process in the 2010s as well as over time. Our main research material consists of the documents related to the steering of gender equality policy in the 2000s (n=20). These include the Government Action Plans for Gender Equality as well as the documents related to their monitoring, the Government Report on Gender Equality adopted in 2010, which states the long term goals for gender equality policy, and Government Programs that have since 1995 included references to gender equality and guide the preparation of the Action Plans. This documentary material is complemented with background interviews with civil servants involved in the planning and implementation of gender equality policy (n=2) as well as persons involved in key processes (legislation, finance, and performance management) in three line ministries (n=10). The second part of our research material is connected to the recent strategic governance reforms, and consists of documents related to two central government development projects and reports by international and national actors recommending more strategic governance (n=6).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Our analysis combines traditional actor-centered policy analysis and process tracing with a discursive approach (Griffin 2015; Lombardo et al. 2009; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). A discursive approach understands governance and its outcomes as a complex combination of meaning and practice, founded by and reproduced through gendered ideas, values and assumptions about the world (Griffin 2015). In other words, we understand governance as socially produced and variable across time and place. Similarly, we understand gender equality as discursively constructed, and therefore highlight the tensions and negotiations embedded in gender equality policy (cf. Lombardo et al. 2009). We pay specific attention to the gendered power relations embedded in practices and discourses of governance, as well as the social and cultural conditions in which these practices and discourses are produced. However, in this article we do not focus on discursive constructions of gender equality (e.g., Lombardo et al. 2009; Kantola and Lombardo 2017), but on the construction of gender equality policy as a distinct policy area through defining, among other things, its relationship to other policy areas and its scope.

When analyzing the depoliticizing impact of governance reforms on the form of gender equality policy, we examine discursive practices of these reforms as well as concrete changes in governance processes (cf. distinction between discursive and governmental depoliticization in Wood and Flinders 2014). Reforms affect not only the steering, scope and measures of gender equality policy, but also the way the highly political and conflictual issue of gender equality and

the whole policy area is framed – which in turn further shapes policy goals and measures (Bacchi 1999).

In the following three analytical sections, we assess the effects of recent strategic governance reforms and discourses on the form of Finnish gender equality policy, that is, on the practices and features related to the governance of gender equality policy as a policy area. We identify three key shifts that are, respectively, connected to the position of gender equality policy on the political agenda, the scope of this policy, and the type of policy measures taken. These shifts are: i) the instrumentalization and sidelining of gender equality policy; ii) the narrowing of gender equality policy; and iii) the bureaucratization of gender equality policy. Our discussion proceeds from shifts that are connected specifically to strategic governance to shifts that are in line with the findings of previous literature on the effects of neoliberal governance. In each case, in line with our theoretical framework, we pay attention to the two dimensions (denial of gendered power vs. denial of political interests) of depoliticization involved in the discourses and practices of strategic governance.

INSTRUMENTALIZATION AND SIDELINING OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY

In this first analytical section, we analyze the effects of the increasing emphasis on strategic governance to the role and visibility of gender equality policy in the government's agenda. According to the principles of strategic governance, governments should focus on a few key

horizontal priorities. In this framework, Finland's long and detailed government programs that discussed a wide range of policy areas including gender equality were seen as too broad and difficult to implement (e.g., OECD 2010; MF 2014; PMO 2011; Doz and Kosonen 2014). Although already earlier governments had tried to identify overarching strategic priorities, Prime Minister Sipilä's government went further and adopted a 'strategic government programme.' Following the principles of strategic management, it set a long-term, but remarkably brief vision for Finland as well as short-term objectives to be reached during the parliamentary term. Instead of discussing each policy area individually, the program set only five horizontal objectives and a few 'key projects' under each objective (PMO, 2015; see also, Elomäki 2019; Mykkänen 2016; Ylöstalo 2019).

Our analysis suggests that strategic governance has, firstly, intensified the instrumentalization of gender equality policy to the government's key priorities. Instrumentalization of all policies and processes to support government's strategic priorities has been one of the key ideas of the Finnish strategic governance discourse and reforms (MF 2014, 5). The effects of this development are visible in the Action Plans for Gender Equality, which in the 2010s harnessed gender equality to serve as an instrument of governments' main policy priorities. For example, the Gender Equality Action Plan 2012–2015 stated that "[t]he measures in the Action Plan are in line with the three main objectives of the Government Programme: the reduction of poverty, inequality and social exclusion; consolidation of public finances; and the strengthening of sustainable economic growth, employment and competitiveness" (MSAH 2012, 9). The priorities to which gender equality policy was here subjected – fiscal consolidation and enhanced

competitiveness – can, as the literature on the gendered effects of austerity has pointed out, increase gender inequalities (e.g., Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Karamessini and Rubery 2014).

In strategic governance gender equality policy becomes discursively framed as an ally of goals and policies that dismantle the welfare state and have grave social and gendered impacts. Instrumentalized gender equality policy cannot challenge the government's austerity and competitiveness-driven agenda, and may end up legitimizing neoliberal economic policies. Neglecting the gendered impact of these policies can be seen as denial of gendered power as well as economic power; in other words, as depoliticization of gender and neoliberal economic policies. This limits the transformative potential of gender equality policy, and reduces the struggle for gender equality to 'gender washing' of priorities that can be detrimental to achieving gender equality (Desai 2007).

The instrumentalization of gender equality policy also had concrete effects on policy measures, as became evident in the Sipilä government's failed efforts to reform the parental leave system. The reform was framed as an effort to reach the government's employment targets, and one of the conditions the government set for the reform was that it had to have positive impacts on employment (MSAH 2017b). The instrumentalized framing as well as the practical requirement of verified employment impacts curbed the reform's transformative potential by making it impossible to improve the sharing of care responsibilities through significantly lengthening the quota of leave time for fathers. The reform was eventually withdrawn due to lack of funding.

The second problematic consequence of strategic governance is that gender equality is eliminated from the political agenda due to the government's strategic prioritizing. As already mentioned, the strategic government program of 2015 was the first in twenty years that did not set gender equality goals and measures. The government programs have not only guided the drafting of the Action Plans for Gender Equality, but they have also had a symbolic role in constructing gender equality policy as an independent policy area within the government's agenda. Based on our interviews, they have also made the government's gender equality goals and commitment to gender mainstreaming visible across the entire government administration <3>.

That Sipilä government's strategic government program completely excluded gender equality objectives illustrates that gender equality is not necessarily seen as an important enough issue to have a role in strategic governance. The result is that gender equality policy as a distinct policy area loses visibility and symbolic value, as well as the potential to effect constructive change. Although gender equality as a policy area continued to exist, according to interviews it was overshadowed by the key projects of the government program, such as social and health care reform <4>. The disappearance of gender equality from the government program also decreased the visibility of gender equality in budget and performance management processes, in which the government program after the strategic governance reforms plays a more important role than before <5>. Finally, as the government program determines the budgetary framework for the government's four-year term, no funding was allocated for gender equality measures.

The strategic governance reform was not the only reason behind the sidelining of gender equality policy in Finland. As in many other countries in Europe (e.g., Roggeband and Krizan 2019; Kantola and Lombardo 2017), austerity politics and the conservative views of the government parties also played a role. However, the influence of the strategic governance reform was very peculiar, because the reform was discussed and perceived as a technical rather than a political or ideological project. In the depoliticized discourse of strategic governance, the sidelining of gender equality policy became a practical solution required by strategic prioritizing, not a political decision driven by interests and ideologies. Conservative governing parties were also able to shun criticism for their unwillingness to pass new gender equality initiatives, such as the parental leave reform, by saying that their hands were tied because these initiatives were not in the government program.

NARROWING SCOPE OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY

In this second analytical section, we analyze how strategic governance has structured the steering and implementation of gender equality policy. The Action Plan for Gender Equality of Prime Minister Sipilä's right-conservative government was drafted according to the principles of strategic governance. The minister in charge of gender equality policy announced early on that the Action Plan would follow the example of the strategic government program and be a short

paper with only a few goals and concrete measures to reach them (Elomäki et al. 2016), and this was also stated in the program itself (MSAH 2017a, 7).

A key effect that the application of strategic governance has on gender equality policy is that it narrows the scope of this policy. The narrowed scope can, firstly, be seen in the number of themes and measures covered in the Action Plans. The Action Plans always consist of a handful of broader themes, of which gender equality in the labor market, reconciliation between work and family, violence against women, and gender mainstreaming have retained their place since the early 2000s. In relation to these themes, the governments set their objectives (such as "reducing the pay gap") and the specific measures to achieve these objectives (such as "implementing the Equal Pay Programme"). The number of themes and measures has varied throughout the 2000s: a broad Action Plan has been followed by a narrow one and vice versa. Table 2 illustrates this variation and shows that with its six themes and 30 measures, the strategic Action Plan 2016-2019 was the narrowest of the 2000s.

[Insert Table 2 here]

We interpret the variation in the broadness of the Action Plans as a struggle between international commitments to gender equality and the demands of efficient and strategic governance. The broadness of the Action Plans 2004–2007 and 2012–2015 was connected to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Action Plans covered many of the

Platform's twelve critical areas of concern, including power and decision-making, education, health, media, and institutional mechanisms. In contrast, the narrowness of the Action Plans 2008–2011 and 2015–2019 was justified with practicality: the broader the Action Plan, the more difficult its implementation <6>. The struggle between gender equality commitments and efficient governance was made explicit in the final report Action Plan 2008–2011:

> When drafting the Action Plan, the decision has to be made, whether the government follows the commitment made in the Beijing Platform for Action about the twelve areas of concern. On this basis, the Action Plan easily becomes quite broad and its implementation and monitoring might be arduous. (MSAH 2011, 16.)

The emphasis on a narrow number of themes in the name of effective and strategic governance is problematic, because it leaves aside important gender equality problems and sidelines international and national commitments. The right-conservative government's Action Plan 2016-2019 did not mention education and research, gender equality infrastructure, decision-making, gender equality legislation, or poverty, even though Finland has been committed to advancing gender equality in these areas and there are severe gender equality problems related to them. For example, the resources and institutional position of gender equality bodies have been insufficient for implementing international and national gender equality commitments in an effective way (Holli and Kantola 2007).

Secondly, the strategic governance reform of 2015 narrowed the scope of gender equality policy by narrowing its objectives. One of the novelties of the strategic governance program of 2015 was the distinction between long-term objectives and objectives for the government's four-year term (PMO 2015). The result-oriented strategy discourse of the right-conservative government meant that the objectives had to be reachable, quantifiable, and measurable. The same idea was applied to the Action Plan. It had long-term goals and goals for the government term, and the Prime Minister and the Minister in charge of gender equality emphasized in the preface of the Action Plan that "[i]n keeping with the spirit of the Government Programme," they had aimed to formulate an Action Plan "whose goals can be realistically achieved" (MSAH 2017a, 7). The focus on realistic objectives resulted in leaving complex gender equality problems that require structural change in the long-term objectives. For example, in terms of reconciliation of work and family life, the long-standing goal of equal sharing of care responsibilities and parenting was left in the long-term goals, where as the government only committed to reducing employer costs arising from family leave and improving services intended for parents facing divorce (MSAH 2017a, 11).

The pressure for reachable goals and measurable results directed gender equality policy in an unambitious but also depoliticized direction. Choosing goals based on how easy they are to quantify and achieve, makes it difficult to comprehensively confront long-term complex gendered hierarchies and power relations. In strategic governance, difficult and complex issues that cannot be solved within a limited timeframe may forever remain only long-term goals. In this framework, gender equality policy becomes an administrative, technocratic project of finding the most efficient solution within the given timeframe (cf. Olivius and Rönnblom 2019).

Thirdly, strategic governance also narrowed gender equality policy in the sense of excluding discussions about gender inequalities. The strategic Action Plan 2016-2019 was the only one that did not contain analysis and reflection of the key gender equality problems in Finland. Although the Gender Equality Unit in charge of drafting the Action Plan had prepared such analysis, it was omitted from the Action Plan <7>. The exclusion of discussion about gender inequalities in the Finnish society and the key reasons behind these inequalities depoliticized gender equality policy through detaching it from gendered power relations, and shifted the focus to the administrative process of setting goals, finding concrete measures to achieve these goals, and measuring success. Whether the goals and measures selected are relevant and sufficient to address the actual inequalities and their core sources became a secondary issue.

In line with the managerialist view that governance is not perceived as a contingent power strategy, but a practical tool to solve complex policy problems (Sorensen and Torfing 2018), the technical discourse around strategic governance framed the narrowing of the gender equality policy as a technical and practical procedure required by the principles of good governance. In the framework of the widely accepted strategy discourse, the weakening of gender equality policy could even be represented as an improvement – a step away from disorderly policymaking towards smarter and more goal-oriented ways of working.

We suggest further that these broader depoliticizing tendencies of strategic governance opened a window for opportunity for the conservative and anti-gender political parties to push aside controversial and persistent gender equality problems and the measures needed to address them. Through representing the narrowing of gender equality policy and the related denial of gendered power as technical decision required by good governance, the strategy-discourse and the related reforms have unintentionally given conservative parties new, subtle tools to weaken gender equality policy as well as legitimize the dismantling of gender equality policy. For example, the theme of equal sharing of care responsibilities that has for a long time been one of the key themes and objectives of Finnish gender equality policy has been difficult for the conservative Centre Party as well as for the openly anti-feminist Finns Party, which instead of gender equality have emphasized families' 'freedom of choice' (Luhtakallio and Ylä-Anttila 2017). The application of strategic governance to the Action Plan for Gender Equality meant that omitting this issue from the government's agenda could be presented as a matter of strategic prioritizing and realistic goal-setting rather than a political and ideological choice. Thus, rhetoric and practices of strategic governance constructed a smooth surface that concealed the conflicts and controversies regarding gender equality.

BUREAUCRATIZATION OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY

In this third analytical section we analyze shifts in the measures to promote gender equality. Finnish Action Plans for Gender Equality have contained various types of gender equality measures. In the 2000s, the governments have taken the following actions: adopted legislation

related to gender equality; provided gender equality training and guidance in different contexts; commissioned research about gender equality; strengthened or built gender equality institutions, organizations and networks; launched projects or programs related to specific issues such as violence against women or equal pay; and improved social benefits and public services. As in many other national contexts (e.g, Harris Rimmer and Sawer 2016, 754), there has been a move away from redistributive measures.

Throughout the 2000s, a significant and increasing part of the Action Plans has been connected to the development and implementation of various administrative techniques and tools: impact assessments, evaluations, monitoring, investigation of different policy options, integration of a gender equality perspective to existing projects and policy programs, and policy experiments. This 'bureaucratization of gender equality policy' (Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016) through the increasing role of administrative practices is line with the findings of earlier literature on the effects of neoliberal governance on gender equality policy (e.g., Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016; Marx 2019), but strategic governance adds specific twists to this development.

Although the development and implementation of different techniques and tools of governance has been a central part of Finnish gender equality policy throughout the 2000s, these techniques and tools have changed over time, when new management fashions have influenced the government administration. For example, in the Action Plan 2016–2019 the appointment of working groups or individuals to investigate different policy options, which has been typical of Finnish policy-making in particular as regards to sensitive issues, gave way to a new policy

development technique, namely experiments (Adkins and Ylöstalo 2018; Ylöstalo 2019). Policy experiments are a way to develop, test and evaluate novel policies with field experiments before they are implemented on a large scale. The Action Plan drew on this new policy-development strategy and proposed to reduce gender segregation through an experiment related to developing student counseling to introduce aspects of work life in female and male sectors and professions (MSAH 2017a, 14).

Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on monitoring and evaluating gender equality initiatives or other policies contributed to the bureaucratization of gender equality policy. The proportion of such measures was the highest in the strategic Action Plan 2016–2019, where almost every fourth of the thirty measures focused on or included monitoring and evaluation, whilst in the beginning of the 2000s such activities played a much smaller role. The Action Plan stated, among other issues that "[t]he National Sports Council will evaluate the implementation of gender equality and non-discrimination issues" (MSAH 2017a, 14). Monitoring and evaluation are needed to observe whether the agreed-on measures have been implemented and have had the desired effects. However, in the Action Plans monitoring and evaluation of already existing policies and targets became gender equality policy measures on their own right. This moves gender equality policy further away from feminist transformation and towards technical, administrative tasks (see Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016; Marx, 2019).

The most visible change in the Action Plans was the proportional increase of policy measures that follow the logic of gender mainstreaming, that is, measures that aim to integrate a gender

perspective into other policies and processes. As said, Finland's strategy for gender equality has leaned on a dual approach of specific measures and gender mainstreaming (Saari 2012) and this has also been explicitly stated in the Action Plans (e.g., MSAH, 2012: 11). However, in the 2000s the balance between gender mainstreaming and specific measures shifted in favor of gender mainstreaming. In the Action Plans 2008–2011 and 2012–2015, a third of the measures were related to gender mainstreaming, while in the strategic Action Plan 2016–2019 their share rocketed to almost half of the measures (47 per cent). These measures included taking a gender perspective into account when developing support services for parents going through a divorce (MSAH 2017a, 12), when developing employment and business services (MSAH 2017a, 9), and when providing reception services for those seeking international protection (MSAH 2017a, 10).

Our analysis suggests that the strategic governance reform of 2015 that shifted the government's attention towards broad, cross-sectoral policy objectives and projects, contributed to the increased emphasis on the logic of gender mainstreaming. Gender equality policy adapted to this shift by focusing on integrating gender perspective to large reforms and projects on which the government's attention and resources were focused <1>. The move towards gender mainstreaming at the expense of specific action was also in line with neoliberal austerity politics and efforts to reduce public spending. It was clear from the beginning of the right-conservative government's term that no resources would be allocated for gender equality policy: one of the interviewees stated, 'There can be no costs.' <2>. In the context of austerity, gender mainstreaming measures represented a solution that did not involve extra costs: in line with the strategy of integration that has been typical of Finnish gender mainstreaming (Saari 2012), civil

servants could be asked to integrate a gender perspective to already existing projects as part of their daily work.

In light of earlier literature, the shift towards gender mainstreaming as well as the use of new administrative tools and techniques to promote gender equality intensified by strategic governance raise concerns about the potential of gender equality policy to make visible and transform gendered power relations. Strategic governance appeared to strengthen gender mainstreaming measures at the expense of positive action, including funding for specific measures to promote gender equality (cf. Stratigaki 2005). Furthermore, in Finland and elsewhere, weak or ineffective implementation of gender mainstreaming has been identified as a core problem (Rubery 2005; Ylöstalo 2017), which further limits the transformative potential of such managerial strategies for gender equality. Moreover, gender equality policy as a whole began to resemble the development, promotion and application of techniques and tools of governance. In this setting, gender equality policy is given the task to produce technical knowledge about the implementation and gendered effects of already agreed-on policies rather than to tackle inequalities with new policies. This bureaucratization of gender equality policy makes gendered power relations and their impacts disappear from view (cf. Alnebrett and Rönnblom 2016) and thereby depoliticizes this policy.

CONCLUSIONS

We have analyzed the depoliticizing effects of managerial governance reforms that transfer private sector management practices to gender equality policy. We have focused on a specific reform, the strategic governance reform implemented in Finland in 2015, in order to examine the context-specificity of neoliberal reform as well as fast changing public management fashions. We have asked how discourses and reforms that emphasize strategic governance have influenced the form of Finnish gender equality policy, focusing on shifts in its position, scope, and types of practices. We have also asked how these shifts have depoliticized gender equality policy and affected its transformative potential. The focus on strategic governance as well as on shifts in the form rather than content of gender equality policy has allowed us to shed light on dynamics of neoliberalization that have not been visible in earlier research on the neoliberalization of gender equality policy.

The strategic governance reform had considerable effects on the form of gender equality policy. The most severe and visible effect concerned the position of gender equality policy on the government's agenda. Because of the government's strategic prioritizing, gender equality policy was sidelined and instrumentalized to serve other government aims and goals. Strategic prioritizing also extended to the steering of gender equality policy, with the effect that the scope of gender equality policy was narrowed. Moreover, the measures to promote gender equality have become increasingly aligned with ideals and practices of managerial governance. The increasing use of new administrative tools to promote gender equality and the expansion of the logic of gender mainstreaming have bureaucratized gender equality policy. However, it is important to note that while the discourses and practices of strategic governance have intensified these shifts, they have characterized Finnish gender equality policy throughout the 2000s. These

changes should therefore be understood in the wider context of neoliberal governance; however, our analysis of the specificities of strategic governance and its effects helps to understand why these changes have taken these forms at this time and place.

In this article, we have paid specific attention to the depoliticizing effects of strategic governance as well as ways to theorize these effects. We have addressed two interlinked dimensions of depoliticization drawn from feminist literature and 'mainstream' political science literature on governance: the denial of gendered power relations and the more general denial of political interests, ideologies, and conflicts. Our analysis of the effects of strategic governance on gender equality policy in the Finnish context shows how both these dimensions are relevant for the transformative potential of gender equality policy. The shifts in position, scope and measures have sidelined gendered power relations and made it difficult to address them through gender equality policy. The general denial of interests, ideologies and conflicts typical for strategic governance has, in turn, helped to weaken gender equality policy and sideline its most contested elements through representing this weakening as a practical rather than a political decision. Thus, inquiring about the broader depoliticizing effects of governance reforms helps to understand what could be called a 'quiet backlash' of gender equality policy in the context of relatively strong gender equality policy and institutions. Such backlash does not necessarily involve an open conflict between gender equality policy and anti-feminist/conservative interests and ideologies, but rather occurs through shifts in governance that are represented as technical rather than political or ideological shifts.

Lastly, we would like to point out how the depoliticizing effects of governance cannot be separated from party political ideologies and power struggles. Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's right-conservative government was followed by an openly feminist left-green government led by 34-year old Sanna Marin (Social Democratic Party). Although the ideas of strategic governance have continued to define the left-green government's work, gender equality issues now have a prominent role in the government programme, the government's family leave is guided by gender equality goals rather than economic priorities, and the Action Plan for Gender Equality in preparation at the time of writing has room for discussing gender inequalities. These shifts illustrate that governance reforms and discourses can be bent to serve the ideologies of government parties – with either negative or positive consequences for gender equality policy. The extent to which Prime Minister Marin's government is able to reverse the long-term depoliticizing shifts in Finnish gender equality policy and politicize gendered power relations in the context of strategic governance remains to be seen.

ENDNOTES

<1> Interview 1

<2> Interview 2

<3> Interviews 1, 4, 5, and 7.

<4> Interview 2

<5> Interview 5, and 7.

<6> Interview 1

<7> Interview 1

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