Gendering Executive Attention: The Impact of Women’s Representation

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Introduction

The extent to which governments in Western Europe give attention to gender equality issues is relatively low, compared with other core issues of government. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of gender equality-related issues that have reached the political agenda since the 1960s. In particular, the kind of gender equality demands that challenge the traditional sexual division of labor between men and women have received growing attention across Western Europe throughout this time, despite the fact that their cost and redistributive scope are likely to invoke considerable friction and resistance to policy change. This raises the question of when and why gender equality issues succeed in gaining executive attention and reach the government agenda for change.

This is particularly interesting because while a great deal of feminist research has investigated the ‘substantive representation of women’, that is, the link between rising female representation and gendered policy change (Lovenduski and Norris 1995), much of this work focuses on the rise of representation by women in Parliament and specific policy outcomes such as domestic violence and abortion rights (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Swers 2005; Weldon 2002). Less is known about the start of the process of policy
change, which entails feminist advocacy for gender policies securing executive attention (Kenney 2003).

Our research throughout the past three years has sought to address this question by exploiting the emergence of new datasets that code to a common codebook the extent to which different policy agendas receive parliamentary and executive attention indicated by the appearance of these policies agendas in official documents\(^1\). These data allow feminist policy scholars, for the first time, to track the development of feminist policy demands of various types, including those which challenge the sexual division of labor, as they gain executive attention across the countries participating in the project. We report here our findings on the relationship between parliamentary and executive female representation and the appearance of costly gender equality policies in government annual speeches in four Western European countries.

**The Impact of Women’s Representation**

A flourishing scholarship of gender and politics research examines the relationship between descriptive representation and substantive representation of women and investigates the extent to which the growing presence of women in political offices positively impacts on women-friendly policy outcomes. Research examining the link between women in legislatures and policy change has delivered mixed results. Several studies have pointed out that the presence of women, as individuals or as a group, in a variety of legislative settings is likely to exert a positive impact on women-friendly policy

\(^1\) See [www.comparativeagendasproject.com](http://www.comparativeagendasproject.com). The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the country research teams for their assistance.
outcomes on a range of issues from child-care programs, maternity leave and family related issues to equal wage policies and political rights (see, for instance, Bratton and Ray 2002; Bonoli and Reber 2010; Kittilson 2008). On the contrary, Weldon (2002) did not identify any linear effect regarding the percentage of female state legislators on the likelihood to adopt policy regarding violence against women. In a similar vein, the analysis of Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) on the impact of political quota adoption on women representation in Argentina concludes that quotas do not favor women-friendly policy outcomes.

More recently, this literature has moved on from an over-simplified interpretation of the ‘critical mass’ argument (Celis et al. 2008) that would expect decisive policy change to occur only once a certain threshold of women Members of Parliament (MPs) – say 30 percent – is reached. Recent research has problematized the idea that a greater number of female representatives will directly lead to a more effective substantive representation. Not all women share the same policy demands, and it might be the case that lone ‘critical actors’ are more important than the overall number of elected women (Childs 2004).

Although the focus of most research has been on parliamentary actors, a growing body of research has turned to examining how the feminization of executives impacts on the processing of policy demands. Scholars increasingly highlight the need for the focus to shift away from women in Parliament to include other sites and political actors (Celis et al. 2008; Mackay 2008). Feminist institutionalist analyses emphasize that it is necessary to identify which institutional settings wield political resources and power in a given political system to accurately assess the agenda-setting capacity of women in
politics (Chappell and Hill 2006; Annesley and Gains 2010). In parliamentary democracies, political resources for agenda setting are increasingly controlled by the government and it may be the case that female executive actors, rather than female legislators, may be more successful in lobbying government (Annesley and Gains 2010; Atchinson and Down 2009).

The contradictory results flowing from research on women in Parliament and the need to examine the effect of women in government leads to two hypotheses, which we report on here.\(^2\) An increasing number of female representatives may increase overall parliamentary concerns about gender equality policies and constitute positive incentives for government in dedicating more attention to such issues. Our first hypothesis, therefore, posits that *executives will pay more attention to gender equality issues as the number of female MPs rises* \((H_1)\).

However, the key resources for agenda setting are controlled by government actors and it may be that female executive representatives are able to lobby more successfully for gender equality policies to receive limited government attention. Accordingly, our second hypothesis postulates that *executives will pay more attention to gender equality issues as the number of female ministers rises* \((H_2)\).

**Gendering Executive Agenda**

To test our hypotheses, we investigate the impact of women’s representation on gendering executive attention toward issues related to the sexual division of labor in four

\(^2\) For a fuller exposition of determinants of gender-equality policy demands receiving government attention across a range of policy domains, please see Annesley et al. 2010 and Annesley, Engeli and Gains. 2011.
European countries that are all parliamentary democracies but that diverge in terms of gender regimes and social security systems: Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, from 1960 to 2007. We draw on new datasets on governmental agendas created within the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP)\(^3\) that use a common policy issues classification of government activities across political systems. The CAP data, thus, allow for comprehensive and reliable comparison across policy domains, countries and institutional settings (Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2011). In this analysis, we rely on the government’s statements of policy priorities and commitments for the period 1961–2007 for our four countries taken from: the Queen’s ‘Speeches from the Throne’ for the United Kingdom (Jennings, Bevan, and John 2010) and the Netherlands (Breeman et al. 2009), the so-called ‘messages’ from the Swiss government (Varone et al., forthcoming) and the Prime Minister’s annual addresses to the Parliament in Denmark (Green-Pedersen 2007).

As the time period under investigation – 1961–2007 – is rather short and the overall promotion of gender equality regarding sexual division of labor is relatively limited, we conducted a pooled binomial logit model with bootstrapped standard errors (Efron and Tibshirani 1994; Kittel and Winner 2005). The dependent variable is coded ‘1’ in a given year when the promotion of gender equality regarding the sexual division of labor is mentioned at least once in the executive agenda, and ‘0’ otherwise.\(^4\) To

\(^3\) See <www.comparativeagendas.org>.

\(^4\) More specifically, the issues addressing the sexual division of labor include (1) the promotion of women’s participation in the labor force, such as measures regarding minimum wage, part-time professional activities, and women’s access to vocational training and workforce development; (2) the eradication of gender discrimination at work, such as unequal pay; (3) the improvement of the gender balance between work and care activities through the development of child-care programs and the introduction of maternity/paternity/parental leave; as well as (4) the removal of discrimination against women in pension schemes and taxation.
measure women’s representation, we use the percentage of parliamentary seats occupied by female MPs in the lower or single House at the time when the speech was delivered. Female ministerial participation was computed as the percentage of female ministers (with or without portfolio) within a cabinet at the time of the speech.\

Our first hypothesis is drawn from the contested argument that women’s increased formal representation in legislatures leads to substantive representation by prompting higher attention to issues related to gender equality on executive agendas. Our analysis lends some support to this hypothesis and suggests that women’s representation in Parliament matters for gaining more executive attention to the type of gender equality policy we examine here (logit coefficient: .087 / bootstrapped standard error (s.e.): 0.41). Figure 1 plots the simulated predicted probabilities of the effect of women’s representation in Parliament on gendering the executive agenda (King et al. 2000). As Figure 1 shows, an increase in the number of female MPs significantly increases the likelihood of the presence of gender equality issues related to sex equality in the division of labor on executive agendas.

Figure 1 – The effect of women’s representation in Parliament, simulated probabilities

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5 To control for time dependence effect, i.e., when the occurrence of an event may increase the likelihood of subsequent events, we include cubic polynomial of time in the model (Carter and Signorino 2010). The logit coefficient in our model proves to be non-significant.
This result is very much in line with previous studies that have shown that women representatives have widened the legislative agenda to raise attention toward gender-related concerns in the United States, Western Europe and Latin America. It also confirms several research findings pointing out that a higher presence of women in Parliament enhances the likelihood of women-friendly policy outcomes regarding equality at work, child-care programs and maternity leave (Bratton and Ray 2002; Bonoli and Reber 2010; Kittilson 2008; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; O’Regan 2000). Our analysis shows that increasing the number of women MPs not only impacts on gendering parliamentary agendas and related policy outcomes, but also provides executives with strong incentives to gender their policy priorities, at least as far as equality at work and in caring responsibilities are concerned.
On the contrary, our findings reported here suggest that the feminization of executives seems not to exert any significant impact in gendering executive agendas (logit coefficient: -.042, bootstrapped s.e.: .023). This result appears somewhat puzzling at first sight. We expected that more women in Cabinet should increase the executive attention to gender equality issues. There are four possible explanations for this paradox: First, the feminization of executives tends to follow a slower and less linear progression than the feminization of the legislature. Indeed, the supply of women ministers is largely dependent upon a supply of representatives from the legislative arena in most political systems (Annesley and Gains 2010; Annesley et al. 2012). There is, therefore, a lagging effect. Second, in a similar vein to critiques of essentialist claims of substantive representation by increased numbers of women in legislatures, we argue that increasing the number of women in executive roles does not imply an automatic increase in the supply of feminist advocates.

Third, cabinet nomination represents a selective process where members are selected by the head of the government to be in charge of a particular set of issues (Beckwith 2007; Annesley et al. 2012). Often women’s segregation in executives within low-key portfolios with limited resources acts to weaken their capacity to promote gender equality from inside. So while being in government tends to increase their potential agenda-setting power, women who are confined into small and scarcely resourced ministries will not be likely to impact on agendas outside the range of their limited portfolio. The result does not mean that some individual women ministers may not act as critical actors, and effectively lobby the Cabinet from the inside, as some single case studies have shown for particular policies at a particular point in time (Annesley 2010).
or that this situation is not dynamic. Nevertheless, there is not an overall statistically significant relationship between an increase in women’s presence as executives and governmental promotion of gender equality over time in the four countries that we have investigated here.

Finally, recent research has demonstrated a link between the likelihood of costly gender equality issues reaching the government agenda and the performance of the economy (Annesley and Gains 2012). It may be the case that executive actors are only able to find space for costly gender equality policy when the economy is growing.

Conclusion

Gender equality issues are relatively recent demands, and in the case of the promotion in the sexual division of labor, are potentially costly. Drawing on data from the comparative agendas project in four European democracies, our analysis makes a contribution to the existing scholarship on gender and agenda setting, and investigates patterns in gendering Western European executive attention.

We find some evidence of the strength of female representation as a political determinant in that there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of female representatives and the presence of gender-equality policy initiatives to address sex inequalities in paid and unpaid work on government agendas. The challenge to linking descriptive representation to substantive representation comes in part because of the contested claim that being female should relate to feminist policy goals or that women acting for women agree with one another. Although the statistical link between the
number of female representatives and governmental attention to gender equality issues does not prove a causal relationship, our finding would support the idea that increasing female representation does increase advocacy for executive attention and reduce the cognitive friction on policy agenda change, at least in respect of the gender-equality policy area under examination here.

Our analysis, however, did not find strong support for the relationship between feminization of the executive and the likelihood of gender equality issues that address the sexual division of labor getting government attention. The lack of a relationship between feminization of the executive and gendered executive agendas suggests there is a time lag between the increase in ‘female’ and increasing ‘feminist’ representation and this representation feeding feminist advocacy in political executives.

This review provides a small exemplar of the way in which the use of the policy agenda data permits testing of hypotheses on engendering government agendas to allow for the possibility of putting ‘gender on the agenda’ and permitting a more detailed examination of the determinants of gender policy change, both of the type we discuss here (see also Annesley et al. 2010) and across a wider range of countries and policy domains (Annesley, Engeli, and Gains 2011).

References


