Challenging the discursive politics of gender equality: What about 'feminist taboos'?

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Abstract

Because gender equality policies are social constructions in which issues of gender inequality and equality get meaning through (amongst others) discursive processes, they may contain biases. While certain biases may be intentional choices, meant to strategically frame a specific policy issue, others may be unintentional and due to the fact that policy makers and activists do not escape from their own frames. We postulate that the same goes for feminist approaches to gender equality policies. We furthermore suggest that feminist scholars could paradoxically be trapped in a hegemonic discourse on gender equality policy that may create taboos about particular approaches to and interpretations of such policies. Therefore we explore what taboos there are and what the postulate about hegemonic discourses on gender equality implies for feminist knowledge production. We also reflect on what could be possible ways to deal with feminist taboos in research about gender equality and other inequalities in general and in discursive politics approaches in particular.

Keywords: discursive politics, gender equality, feminist taboos, reflexivity

Introduction[1]

Gender equality is a social construction in which the discursive aspect of that construction plays an important role. Politicians, policymakers, civil society actors, judges, academics and opinion makers formulate and/or contribute to the shaping of gender equality policies, and through these discursive processes issues of gender inequality and equality get their meaning.[2] These meanings are multiple, sometimes rather contradictory than coherent and change over time and place. Scholars in the discursive constructions of gender equality, such as Bacchi (2005; 2009) and Marx Ferree (2009; 2002; 2000) make us reflect on the extent to which we, as feminist researchers or scholars in gender and politics, can actually stand outside the existing hegemonic discourses of our disciplines and political environment. In this paper we use the term "hegemonic discourses" in the sense that Bacchi (2009; 2005) means, that is overarching frames that may steer the actors' conscious shaping of an issue towards unintended directions.[3] These overarching frames set a horizon of meanings that places some specific frames in a more central location, moving us to fix particular interpretations of gender equality issues in an automatic and not particularly thought-out way. While certain biases may be intentional choices, meant to strategically frame a specific policy issue, others are unintentional and due to the fact that policy makers and activists do not escape from hegemonic discourses such as these overarching frames.

In this paper we postulate that the same goes for feminist approaches to gender equality policies. We furthermore suggest that feminist scholars could paradoxically be trapped in a hegemonic discourse on gender equality policy that may create taboos about particular approaches to and interpretations of such policies. We define a taboo as an often tacit but general agreement not to discuss or do something. We find that feminist scholars tend to see patriarchy first, through the identification of framings of the concept of gender equality that shrink it or bend it at the advantage of other policy goals and priorities, or through hegemonising frames that exclude civil society actors from the political debates and that prefer technical policy instruments over more political ones. Such recurrent feminist approaches, could, if applied without reflection, block gender equality policies.

In this paper we explore feminist taboos with respect to gender equality policies. We analyse what taboos there are, what the postulate about hegemonic discourses on gender equality implies for feminist knowledge production, and reflect on what

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[1] This paper is a spin-off of a recently edited volume (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009), especially its chapters 1 and 12. We especially wish to thank Carol Bacchi and Myra Marx Ferree for helping us to clarify the concepts we employ in this paper.

[2] In exceptional cases politicians first define the understanding of gender equality before translating these into policies, as did Hedy d'Ancona in the Netherlands in the 1980s.

[3] Others - like Ferree (2009) - distinguish between the more static "master frames", which carry a single fixed definition that highlights one element as important and give it a more central position, and the more dynamic and relational concept of "discourses", which encompass the multiple interconnections and reciprocal references that exist among ideas within particular webs of meaning.

could be possible ways to deal with feminist taboos in research about gender equality and other inequalities in general and in discursive politics approaches in particular. The paper is structured into four sections. We start with a discussion of the discursive construction of gender equality policies, more especially the various processes through which gender equality gets meaning. By discursive politics we mean *the intentional or unintentional engaging of policy actors in conceptual disputes that result in meanings attributed to the terms and concepts employed in specific contexts* (see Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). We thereby distinguish between four processes, temporarily fixing a particular interpretation of gender equality, shrinking its meaning, stretching it to include new dimensions or elements, or bending it to goals other than gender equality. We then analyse the negative consequences of such discursive processes for the content of the concept of gender equality, whereby we mainly focus on processes in which the goal of gender equality is bent so as to fit other policy goals. In a third section we discuss the relation between hegemonic discourses on gender equality policies and feminist taboos. In a fourth section we, finally, reflect on ways to deal with feminist taboos in research about discursive (gender) equality policies, drawing mainly on Bacchi's (2009) notion of reflexivity.

The discursive construction of gender equality in politics

Gender equality is a concept that has travelled a lot - through times and places - across different national borders, amidst different policy actors, both at institutional and non-institutional levels, and across a variety of national and international organizations. In its journeys across different times and contexts the meaning of the concept of gender equality is shaped in different ways in a number of processes. We distinguish between four of such processes that fix a particular meaning of gender equality, stretch it, shrink it or bend it to some other goal (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). We will briefly discuss all of these processes, highlighting how they affect the concept of gender equality and gender equality policies.

Fixing a certain meaning is a frequent process due to attempts to define what is to be understood by gender equality. When particular definitions of gender equality are created in a given context (for instance equal opportunities or positive actions or gender equality in politics) they can be fixed for some time. Fixing is not meant here in the sense of repairing the meaning of gender equality, but in the sense of establishing it. This fixing of the meaning of concepts is inevitable to be able to discuss issues that are related to these concepts and to take action. In this respect, the fixing of the concept of gender equality is the result of a discursive struggle. Feminist activists' claims for gender equality in political decision-making - enshrined as parity democracy in France, gender democracy in Germany, or a balanced participation of men and women in decision-making in the European Union - are specific examples of such fixing of the meaning of gender equality. Fixing, in that case, is also an achievement in the gender struggle, meaning that gender equality has been enshrined in legal or political documents

and has become recognized as a no longer contested goal. Fixing a meaning of gender equality, then, can open discursive windows of opportunity for subjects to act, by implementing the fixed meaning. It can also be the starting point for actors to challenge another fixed meaning that is perceived as more limited, or indeed unjust. It can initiate processes of contestation which may result in a wider interpretation of a concept that is more inclusive of actors who were previously excluded, or that better reflects the complexity of gender inequality. However, fixing labels, such as "gender inequality is a women's problem" or "domestic violence is an ethnic minority problem", can also result in stereotyping specific ethnic groups in the latter case, and slow down the achievement of gender equality by not questioning privileged groups like men in the first case.

In these last cases, we notice the fixing of 'shrunk' concepts. Shrinking the meaning of gender equality occurs when a broader political scope of a concept is restricted to more limited meanings. Gender equality can, for instance, be shrunk into non-discrimination in a strictly legal sense, as the European Union tries to do in its treatment of inequalities (Kantola and Nousiainen 2009). In the US civil rights movement – as Ferree (2009) argues- "equal rights" claims were progressively "shrunk" to only imply the most formal legal rights, separated from the concept of "social justice", and instead tied to the idea of "diversity" which was "shrunk" once more to mean that no "special rights" could be considered. Shrinking the concept of gender equality also occurs when in relation to a particular problem only a limited number of frames is adopted almost automatically, as if there was not a broader pool of meanings to choose from. In this case shrinking seems the result of assumptions that are taken for granted in the context of other dominant discourses. Examples of this process can be found in Rönnblom's account of the treatment of gender equality in Swedish regional policies (Rönnblom 2009; 2005), where gender equality is shrunk to mean "only women", rather than the relation between women and men, or where gender equality is mainly associated with the issue of "women in political representation".

Policy discourses can also 'stretch' the meaning of gender equality by broadening the previous understanding of the concept to incorporate more meanings. For instance, an initial definition of gender equality as non-discrimination can be broadened to include substantive equality, but stretching can also imply that a definition of substantive equality is to incorporate initiatives of equal opportunities. A good example of the stretching of gender equality can be found in Booth and Bennett's (2002) definition of gender mainstreaming, which comprises a much larger array of actions than the definition put forward by the Council of Europe (Group of Specialists 1998), also including targeted actions. Stretching is partly also incited by the fact that gender equality ties together two independent - but interrelated - concepts, gender and equality. The multidimensional reality of equality incites stretching initiatives that extend the meaning of the concept, and is a good example of where a tension between gender and equality can arise. Gender equality is a family member of other equality goals, and this can lead either to drawing borders between the different equality

struggles or to stretching borders to readapt them in a more inclusive way (Walby 2005; Verloo 2006; Squires 2007).

Finally, gender equality can experience processes of 'bending' when policy discourses shape its meaning at the expense of the goal of gender equality. Bending occurs when the concept of gender equality is adjusted to make it fit some other goal than the achievement of gender equality itself. The issue of reconciling employment and unpaid care work is an example of fixing, shrinking, or stretching gender equality when it is about the enabling of women to combine paid labour and unpaid care work. It becomes one of bending when the focus shifts to economic growth or demographic deficits. For instance, the framing of "family policies" in the European Union (EU) over the last decade was at first connected with the idea of sharing tasks within the family. The need to share was a condition to create equal opportunities for women in the labour market, as can be found in the 1992 Council Recommendation on childcare. However, as Stratigaki (2004) argues, when this issue was later incorporated in the European employment strategies of the 1990s, it gradually shifted meaning from the goal of sharing to that of reconciling work and family life. The main accent was placed on the organization of labour, a shift that allowed the growing prioritization of competitiveness and the creation of employment. From an objective of gender equality, the issue of family policies was bent to become a purely market oriented objective, which involved the reproduction and consolidation of women's traditional roles as primary care givers instead of the progressive introduction of a sharing of caring tasks.

In sum, we see that the concept of gender equality is shaped through different interpretations elaborated by a variety of institutional and civil society actors, following earlier understandings that have become dominant or embedded into common sense. Meanings of the concept are fixed for some time, shrunk within or stretched beyond particular labels, and bent to fit particular policy frames. These discursive processes have their consequences for gender equality.

'Negative' consequences of discursive processes: depoliticising and degendering

Discursive processes that shrink and stretch the meaning of gender equality leave their traces in the contents of the concept of gender equality. For instance, the fixing of shrunk concepts can limit the range of possible framings of an issue, thus leaving out particular interpretations of it, or can block more comprehensive interpretations of the issue. The recurrent focus on women as a homogeneous group, as for instance, in equal opportunities for women in the labour market, can prevent a thorough analysis of the diversity of women's positions, let alone an analysis of the mechanisms determining the differences between men's and women's positions (Meier *et al.* 2007). The stretching of the concept of gender equality to include other inequalities can result in the privileging of particular inequalities over others and in triggering dynamics of exclusions. The expansion of the issue of violence against women to violence against women and children or

to domestic violence, often involved the distribution of the same resources over a larger number of target groups and less attention being paid to women or particular groups of women (such as sexual violence at the workplace) (Krizsan *et al.* 2007).

We find that processes in which gender equality is bent towards some other goal have particularly critical consequences. In our view this is mainly because processes of bending gender equality to some other goal depoliticize the issue of gender equality, thus not representing gender equality as a 'political' issue. One key element that is neutralized in the depoliticization is the "dimension of conflict" that, as Rönnblom argues, is relevant because it highlights power dynamics. In her words: 'To politicize a question is to acknowledge existent power relations in society and thus create opportunities for change.' (Rönnblom 2009: XX). Depoliticizing an issue tends to obscure its discordant relations, its hierarchy of power, which, if recognized, could have opened up possibilities for challenging that hierarchy. When the normative group of men is not even mentioned as part of the solution or the problem of gender inequality, the unequal power relations between women and men are left unquestioned and this may block opportunities for change (see Lombardo and Meier 2008). Similarly, when discourses, such as economic growth, are represented as unquestioned, overarching political goals, they limit actors' possibilities of contesting them and of unveiling power dynamics that are embedded (but silenced) in the process (see Rönnblom 2005), thereby preventing political transformation from taking place.

Depoliticization in gender equality is also found in the idea of degendering. This refers - as Jalušič (2009: XX) states - to how 'issues that were quite promisingly politicized and consciously gendered soon after became de-gendered (the gender dimension was reduced, neutralized, or abolished)'. Bending the concept of equality within the family to make it fit the dominant labour market agenda has contributed to degendering the issue, blocking gender equality goals such as the challenging of existing unequal gender roles within the family. In effect, reconciliation policies appear more focused on solving the problem of demographic decline and promoting economic development, than to progressing in gender equality (Meier *et al.* 2007). The policy issue of domestic violence is another good example of processes of gendering and degendering. The fact that domestic violence is considered as a public policy matter is evidence of the gendering of the issue and represents a success of the long-term feminist efforts for politicizing the sphere of personal and private relations (Kriszan *et al.* 2007). However, the issue has also suffered from processes of degendering, when new policy frames appear in which victims and perpetrators are described in gender-less terms, and power mechanisms get blurred. In sum, politicizing the concept of gender equality seems crucial in order to be able to challenge the power dynamics inherent in it.

Depoliticising and degendering are different ways of assessing the consequences of discursive processes, which reflect some kind of normative assessment of what gender equality should or should not be. If we scrutinize our own analyses of discursive processes as developed in this paper and elsewhere (see Verloo 2007) and the analyses of authors who also adopt a discursive politics

approach such as Ferree (2009; 2002; 2000), Bacchi (2009; 2005), Rönnblom (2009; 2005), or True (2009), we notice that we tend to interpret processes that shape the meaning of gender equality quite similarly. For instance, many of us find that gender equality is edged out at the advantage of other frames. Or we tend to see frames that exclude civil society actors from the political debates. In general in these analyses the description of negative effects of discursive processes of gender equality dominates. Why do we share such similar interpretations? Is this rooted in our position and knowledge as feminist researchers? Are the effects of discursive processes on gender equality really so negative? Which hegemonic discourses influence our analyses?

Hegemonic discourses and "feminist taboos"

Policy actors' shaping of the meaning of gender equality occurs within broader hegemonic discourses that can steer actors' attention towards the privileging of particular interpretations and the marginalisation of others. Gender scholars have highlighted the presence of hegemonic discourses about the economy (Rönnblom 2009), the nation (Rai 2008), or the state (Kantola 2006) and their specific demographic (Meier *et al.* 2007) or crime and justice (Krizsán *et al.* 2007) concerns that influence the frames on gender equality. In some cases, scholars see these particular hegemonic discourses as setting the goals towards which gender equality objectives are bent. But if some discourses are so hegemonic that they shape policy frames that are articulated by policymakers, why should they not also have an impact on frames articulated by feminist or gender scholars?

As Bacchi states, 'there is also a need to be wary of placing too much emphasis on the ability to *shape* useful frames (intentionally) and too little attention to the *shaping impact* of dominant systems of meaning on reformers themselves and their interventions' (Bacchi 2009: XX). Bacchi makes us reflect precisely on the extent to which we, as (feminist) researchers in gender and politics, can actually stand outside the existing hegemonic discourses. In her opinion 'it is important to consider where frames come from and if it is indeed possible to stand outside them and manipulate them to one's purpose' (Bacchi 2009: XX).

Along with Bacchi, we argue that hegemonic discourses have an influence on the production of feminist knowledge. One aspect to consider in the analysis is the existence of feminist hegemonic discourses and their influence on the thinking of feminist scholars. We, as feminist scholars are not only surrounded by 'mainstream' hegemonic discourses. Within the feminist niche we also do not escape from the phenomenon of hegemonic discourses, be they feminist. To our understanding there are several reasons of why such hegemonic feminist discourses might exist. One is the position from which actors articulate their frames. Common cultural and theoretical backgrounds might encourage a similarity in the normative frames produced. In our case, the elements that we share in our background, as gender scholars in discursive politics, might influence our similar positioning in the assessment of discursive processes. Apart from

some knowledge of discursive politics, gender scholars adopting a discursive politics approach also share knowledge of gender equality policies. Moreover, they sometimes explicitly position themselves as "feminist", or express more or less implicit normative understandings of what gender equality is or should be. The identification of recurring normative aspects concerning the understanding of gender equality in scholarly works on gender makes us question the normative standard on which gender equality is based. What standard do these definitions of gender equality explicitly or implicitly relate to? Is there a feminist hegemonic discourse on gender equality? If yes, what are our 'feminist taboos' or deeper normative assumptions of what gender equality is and how it should be reached?

We see a couple of discourses we would qualify as feminist hegemonic discourses. Some of our deeper, unquestioned normative assumptions as feminist researchers come from hegemonic discourses that move us to fix particular interpretations of gender equality issues in an automatic and unreflexive[4] way. One normative undertone about gender equality that we see in feminist scholars' discourses is the tendency to think that "participation of non-hegemonic" voices in gender equality policies is the only or best way of improving the quality of gender equality policies, while "improving the knowledge base" in other ways is downplayed and presented as a "technical" move away from politicization (see Verloo and van der Vleuten 2009, Lombardo and Meier 2006, Verloo 2005, Woodward 2004). Could this be a sort of "feminist taboo" that comes from this pool of shared meanings on gender equality, which on the one hand has its (empirical) reasons for being taboo, but on the other hand, if automatically and unreflexively applied, could also block further progress in gender equality policies? Bustelo and Verloo (2009) for instance argue that if "technical" instruments such as gender impact assessment are based on sound feminist theory and empirical knowledge, and if knowledge is built into a technical tool, then "technical" approaches should not necessarily involve depoliticization. Rather, such tools could be a valuable contribution to the furthering of gender equality.

Related to the focus on non-hegemonic actors is also the fact that the accent is generally on the need for various sorts of gender experts (in policymaking, the academia and civil society). This automatically downplays the potential role of other actors, such as the so-called mainstream public policy officials who might be valuable contributors to the furthering of gender equality and of alliances with such actors.

Bacchi (2005; 2009) highlights another trap in feminst discourses which is that elites are assumed to be the only subjects with power to shape discourses for their own interests, while the "common people" are mere receptors of discourses and have no power to challenge dominant meanings. This perspective - as she argues - could have a disempowering effect on people, as it does not even enable the theorization of resistance to hegemonic discourses. In this way Bacchi unveils a trap that could block feminists to identify windows of opportunity for social movement actors to intervene and shape dominant meanings themselves.

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[4] See the next section for a discussion of 'reflexivity'.

Other discourses we would qualify as feminist hegemonic discourses might stem from the feminist positioning as being a transformative analysis (Griffin 2002 cited in van der Sanden 2007). The will to have or even make things change towards a more (gender) equal society can make us consider that not enough progress is made or draw our attention to stagnation and setbacks. A feminist taboo that we find in feminist literature is the interpretation of processes of bending and stretching in mainly negative terms, or the tendency to look for negative effects first. For instance, in an analysis of the 2007 Belgian gender mainstreaming act, Meier and Celis (2009) pay a lot of attention to potential shortcomings of this act, such as the fact that much of its impact will depend on the orders in pursuance of the new act. However, the act in itself stretches the concept of gender mainstreaming beyond the more limited initial interpretation to be found in the Belgian legislation, prescribing a more proactive attitude on behalf of the federal government. The focus on the transformation of existing gender relations and the will to achieve more (gender) equality, makes us loose sight of a more long term or comparative perspective, which allows for putting results into perspective. Even though the 2007 Belgian gender mainstreaming act might not be perfect, it fixed the political definition of gender mainstreaming closer to the "ideal" often put forward than it was the case before. The putting into practice of this new definition might not go without discursive and other political struggles, but the landmark to which feminist and other actors can refer was nonetheless raised to a higher level. This does not mean that we should become less critical, but the mental trap risks overlooking the fact that discursive processes can be enabling and productive as well, and not only constraining.

In one way or another, when we analyze gender equality issues we seem to fall into different feminist traps that make us understand the problems we analyze in terms of pre-existing feminist discourses. As the analysis of gender equality policies shows that gender equality frames are regularly caught in existing, sometimes hegemonic, webs of meaning, and feminist discourses also seem to be trapped within particular hegemonic discourses, how then can we conceptualize feminist actors working towards change? It is highly unproductive and not necessarily true to see hegemonic discourses shaping everything and everyone, but it is also evident that a simple agency concept would not do justice to the powers of discourse. What solutions to this old age dilemma of agency versus structure can we offer?

Reflexivity and discursive politics

Bacchi (2009) calls for "reflexivity" as a way to capitalize on small margins for change. Reflexivity involves the need for a greater awareness about the feminist academic discourses that we are all part of. It involves scrutinising our own frames as feminist scholars in order to become more aware of the implicit normative assumptions that we make in our assessment of discourses on gender equality. But how could feminist researchers apply such reflexivity to discursive politics analysis in order to become more aware about what biases shape our

discourses, and thus to temper the possibility of adopting taken-for-granted assumptions in our analyses? We see three such possibilities.

Bacchi (2005; 2009) suggests drawing upon a wide variety of diverse women's perspectives and experiences, in particular by prioritizing the perspectives and embodied experiences of often under-represented groups. Although it falls within the first feminist trap that we mentioned (the participation of non-hegemonic subjects as a quality criterion for gender policies), this suggestion has the potential to reveal the predominance of traditional gender relations and power mechanisms in policy practices, particularly if it is reflexively applied so that it does not treat participation as a "dogma". The presence of a large array of social groups is not the only quality criterion nor is it only required to feed public policies with respect to gender equality. Drawing upon a wide variety of embodied women's perspectives and experiences should also help feminist scholars and activists to be reflexive on their work and activities.

A second type of applied reflexivity is the approach that looks at the reciprocal historical constitution of the different inequalities that is adopted in Ferree's discussion of how both gender equality and other forms of inequality are mutually discursively constructed as they encounter each other. This type of reflexivity suggests a reflection on how the pre-existing context in which inequalities interact creates a 'web of meanings' that shapes the way in which inequalities are understood and treated in a particular context. This in turn helps to understand why in different contexts we find a particular approach to inequalities rather than another. Ferree (2009) shows how Germany and the US institutional and discursive contexts offer actors different kinds of opportunities for intersecting the web of meanings of inequality. The class-centric meaning of inequality that has been historically developed in Germany and the race-centric meaning of inequality of the US have created distinctive ways of understanding gender. Her idea of 'interactive intersectionality' helps us to reflect on how intersectionality is a dynamic process in which the meanings that each inequality takes for particular women and men, and the interaction between, for instance, race and gender, or sexual orientation and gender, contribute to shape the meaning of each inequality. Applied to our discussion on reflexivity, this can mean two things. Firstly, feminist researchers need to be aware of how the historical and/or geographical context in which they think can shape their perception of the meaning of equality. For instance, taken for granted assumptions on a particular inequality may be seen as normal or preferable in a given context and may make researchers especially attentive or blind to some inequality. Secondly, the processes by which wide webs of interactions construct meanings of gender and other inequalities can produce outcomes in the form of policy changes that develop a life of their own and take directions which are unexpected for the policy actors who had originally struggled for the change to come about, but from a position different from the one finally reflected in the reality. Be the outcome better or worse than the intended one, this encounter with an 'unexpected' policy change that resulted from a variety of interactions can open up the former horizon of the actors who participated in the interaction and change their own preassumptions.

Finally, a third type of reflexivity is stimulated by encountering different epistemological perspectives that make us become more aware of our own "feminist taboos". The encounter between more constructivist perspectives (that are biased against a positivist approach) and more positivist perspectives (that are in turn biased against a constructivist approach) can, in spite of the difficulties in understanding each other, be productive for reflecting on the cultural assumptions of participants in the debate. For instance, Walby's work on the possibility to ground feminist knowledge in the power of argument and reasoned debate and to overcome the postmodern block towards the production of feminist knowledge beyond specific locations (Walby 2000) has forced us to scrutinize our own assumptions. This enables us to identify a number of "feminist taboos" hidden in our positions. It has widened the interpretative levels of our findings, for example by discovering positive aspects in framing processes that during a first analysis only seemed to embed negative consequences for gender equality.

The discussion about "feminist taboos" in the analysis of gender equality policies and the importance of reflexivity can have different implications for the understanding of discursive politics. An important consequence is a reflection on the process of "fixing" the meaning of gender equality that explores the possibilities of feminist knowledge production in the context of the partiality of each attempt to fix a certain meaning of gender equality. This partiality needs to be understood as a set of ongoing processes of contestation. The fact that we (and other feminist scholars) tend to be so negative about processes that stretch, shrink, bend, and fix the meaning of gender equality shows that we fix the meanings as either good or bad. This already means taking a stand against the emblematic postmodern position that we cannot fix anything, since everything is in flux, simultaneously good and bad (Lyotard 1984; Haraway 1988).

Walby's work on the power of argument beyond the politics of location (Walby 2000) warns us that the focus on discursive processes and their (un)productive consequences might easily be interpreted in a relativist way, parallel to the storytelling position. The use of this discursive approach might lead to the conclusion that, as there is no feminist knowledge transcending particular locations, it is impossible to act on this knowledge in order to promote gender equality policies. Walby instead argues that it is possible to ground feminist knowledge on the power of argument and reasoned debate. This could be one way of creating common ground for the development of gender equality policies.

However, we should keep in mind that power mechanisms are also at work in the conditions that enable "reasoned debate" and "argument". Argument and reasoned debate are not neutral, since some structural conditions (resources, authority, time, and so on) may enable particular positions to acquire more power than others (Young 1996). Here, Bacchi's suggestion about the need for feminists' "introspective reflection" can help us, as feminist researchers, to stay "honest" about our own assumptions by reading analyses different from our own particular perspective. A greater awareness of where we come from, and of the existing differences in material and other power, might help us understand how partial and "unfinished" our positioning is with respect to the fixing of a certain meaning of gender equality. Similarly, research focusing on how power mechanisms are at

work in reasoned debate and argument can increase our knowledge and provide ideas for dealing with power differences. And still this research does not delegitimise our intervention in the debate and our normative assessment of gender equality processes.

This leads us to argue that fixing a specific meaning is in fact inevitable, and even necessary to be able to assess the process and move forward both in theory and practice. As Ferree (2009: XX) writes: 'We make categories to understand the world, and do so from the standpoints that we occupy, but the point of our understanding this world of inequality and injustice is to change it.' We do not mean to argue that any definition of gender equality is valid and that we cannot assess the value of any one over another. Indeed we can, but being aware of the fluid character of the concept of gender equality and of the fact that sometimes a particular, seemingly negative, fixing of the meaning of gender equality could in fact open up opportunities for gender equality in the future. Ferree (2009) reminds us that the whisper of a butterfly's wings in Hong Kong can set off a tornado in New York. The way in which policy actors will use or reinterpret a fixed meaning is rather unpredictable in the sense that it can have different effects than the ones expected both from the actors involved in the meaning's elaboration and the actors who engage in challenging this meaning.

In this respect fixing the meaning of gender equality could open "discursive windows of opportunity". Fixing the issue of gender equality in laws and other authoritative texts, as Ferree (2009) suggests, can be both constraining and enabling depending on the actors that interpret and employ a certain fixed meaning and on the context in which a meaning is put "on paper". In her examples, gender equality in Germany means something different than in the US because of the distinctive history of inequalities and the webs of alliances created around them, and the emphasis that was placed on one inequality (race or class) rather than another. The identification of constraints in the fixing of certain meanings is a starting point for contesting such meanings. True (2009), for instance, shows how the framing of European Union trade policy has not only resulted in trade-offs for gender equality but has also created opportunities for gender advocates to contest its meaning and for the International Labor Organization to make coalitions with the European Union.

As Rönnblom (2009: XX) writes: 'When thinking of politics as discursively produced there is always an opening for change'. In this respect fixing does not necessarily involve *freezing* the meanings of gender equality and other inequalities, as one might perhaps think. In the struggle for gender equality, constitutional amendments, laws, and policy plans are often indeed seen as crowning achievements, whereas they are still only a moment in time or an element in a much broader process. This perception of what a constitutional amendment or law signifies might also make us reconsider the value or weight of processes of stretching, bending, fixing, and shrinking: do we not see them as processes leading to an "end" product or as unilateral processes? If we look at issues over a long time span we might find processes that stretch a bit, bend a bit, fix a bit, and shrink a bit, simultaneously or consecutively. What does all this imply for our understanding of discursive politics?

Conclusions

The emphasis on reflexivity as a device to help feminist scholars develop a greater awareness of their own 'feminist taboos' has provided us with elements for what we could call a more 'critical' understanding of discursive politics. A critical understanding of discursive politics would be based on attention to power and to reflexivity in its different forms and practices. It would draw on a renewed awareness of the enabling and constraining dimensions of discourses (discursive opportunity structures) and on the awareness of power mechanisms operating at different levels for a variety of actors.

One implication of our reflections on discursive politics analysis for feminist production of knowledge and action for gender equality is that it is necessary to briefly "fix" a certain meaning of gender equality, or of a specific gender inequality problem, in order to be able to achieve something, by, for instance interpreting it, contesting it, or implementing it. A second point is that fixing a meaning does not necessarily involve freezing it, or limiting any possibility of further change, as long as this meaning is under continuous observation and reflection. Reflexivity is then needed so that 'feminist taboos' do not automatically affect our interpretations, thus blocking out certain attributions of meaning to gender equality, imposing certain discourses, or negatively assessing particular policy practices. Reflexivity is also needed to be "kept honest" - as Bacchi says - about the imbalance of power between different positionings, since actors' different access to resources and power positions affects the role they play in frame production. Reflexivity is also necessary in order to be kept aware of the ongoing, dynamic process of the construction of the concept of gender equality, which may transform what at some point and in some contexts may appear to be a negative meaning into an opportunity, and vice-versa. A greater awareness of the enabling and constraining dimensions of discourses could help feminist theorists to put their 'taboos' in a broader perspective. After all, the issue of gender equality is constantly moving, often with unpredicted consequences, and the main underlying question pushing the process forward is what gender equality is and what it should be.

Discursive politics is a key concept for anyone interested in gender transformation because of the inherent possibility to transform gendered societies, norms, behaviours, and identities. The terms of struggle are set in discursive politics, and this is therefore a crucial dimension of power. Policy actors engaging in conceptual disputes, i.e. discursive politics, do so from various positions of material and institutional power. Powerful positions increase the actors' ability to stretch new demands into old pacified ones, bend them towards a mainstream goal, or close down such disputes in a way that (intentionally or not) resonates with their interests. Powerful positions can reinforce the use of argument or facilitate the use of discursive opportunities. A lack of such power positions means that the power of argument can still be used, if it can be presented as fitting the present hegemonic webs of meaning. Policy actors working towards change,

as feminists, are likely to have lower positions of material and institutional power, and will thus depend more on "discursive power" in order to make progress towards change. Still, classical power mechanisms in access and use of resources are also at work in the conditions that enable or hinder "reasoned debate and argument" (Walby 2000). Hence, to keep the discussion on the concept of gender equality flow and continue its travels across time and space, while improving the awareness of the constraining and enabling dimensions of power, actors who engage in the disputes on the concept of gender equality would need to reflect on the experience of their own (feminist) 'taboos' and to especially think of "reflexivity-enhancing" devices for feminist theorists, activists, and policymakers.

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