

## Publications

### Studying Gender Equality in Europe

by Meike Verloo

Gender equality policies in Europe have developed into a configuration of very different policies across countries. One of the most debated differences concerns strategies such as antidiscrimination, positive action or affirmative action, and gender mainstreaming, the last of which has been developed since 1995. In this dynamic field many femocrats, feminist scholars and feminist activists are debating the strengths and weaknesses of these diverse strategies and conceptualizing the relationships among them.

While these debates are highly significant for theory and practice, the current attention to strategies – how to reach the goal of gender equality – obscures another question at least as important: what is gender equality? This is the leading question in the MAGEEQ (an acronym of MAInstreaming GEnder EQuality) project, presented in this article. MAGEEQ does not ask the question in a normative sense, trying to give a definitive answer by giving arguments for what it should be. Rather, MAGEEQ analyzes current European policy realities and asks, what is meant when gender equality or similar concepts are used? What is the meaning of 'gender equality' in these policies?

There is good reason to expect to find a large variety of meanings in gender equality policy practices. This can be caused by differences in feminist positions, such as the well-documented equality-difference opposition, but also by differences in context across European countries. The multitude of languages in Europe makes this variety less visible when studying the academic literature or 'exported' texts in English about country specific policies as it obscures 'local' concepts such as *emancipatie* (literally emancipation, Netherlands), *gleichstellung* (literally equalization, German), or *promocion de la mujer* (literally promotion of women, Spain). Similarly, we can find references to various concepts such as women's politics, gender discrimination, equality of the sexes, and women's rights. Although the label is not always a good indicator of its meaning, the variety of labels and concepts indicates very dissimilar histories and grounding of gender equality policies.

A second reason to study the meaning of gender equality in practice is that, under conditions of increasing Europeanization, it can be expected that discrepancies and inconsistencies in the meaning of gender equality will necessarily hinder or endanger implementation of European policies. Ute Behning and Serrano Pascual (2001), in their study of gender mainstreaming in employment in twelve west European countries, find differences in national paths pursued towards the goal of gender equality. They conclude that most policies presented as examples of implementation of the European Union strategy of gender mainstreaming are simply a continuation of previous policies.

To study the meaning of gender equality in European policies, the MAGEEQ research project treats the concept of gender equality as an empty signifier. We use this concept as an overarching label to gather information and dissect the underlying meanings of various concepts such as emancipation, equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming or equality between men and women. We assume that its

meaning can have very different characteristics, be fragmented or unified, well articulated or fuzzy, liberal or radical, and encompass a wide range of feminist political issues and positions.

We use the concept of frames and framing as a basic concept for our analysis, starting with defining a frame as an interpretation scheme that structures the meaning of reality and a policy frame as an organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy problem in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed. Policy framing then can be seen as the process of constructing, adapting and negotiating policy frames.

Funding under the EU's Fifth Framework has provided support for us to analyze policy frames of gender equality in six European countries and the EU itself. The set of countries includes the Netherlands and Austria, Greece and Spain, Slovenia and Hungary. We focus on the period after the World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995-2004. Our aim is to compare policy frames on gender equality between the EU and national states in this period, and we have developed a conceptual framework that combines elements of different theories. Based on social movement policy theory and discourse analysis, we have specified a policy frame as a specific configuration of positions on the dimensions of diagnosis and prognosis of the policy problem, of roles attributed in diagnosis and prognosis, and of voice given to the problem.

Based on gender theory, we then define a policy frame as a specific configuration of positions on these dimensions articulated in terms of gender dimensions (identity, norms, behavior, institutions), gender structures (labor, citizenship, intimate relationships), gender mechanisms distribution of resources, norms on gender), and intersectionality (race/ ethnicity, class, sexuality, age). We have labeled our approach 'critical frame analysis' because not only discursive elements but also attributed roles, voice, gender and intersectionality have an important place in this framework, which enables an analysis in terms of power relations.

Since 2003, MAGEEQ has produced reports on gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming in the six countries. As the EU is currently enlarging its scope beyond labor, seen in the process around the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Constitution, MAGEEQ has chosen to concentrate on issues of citizenship or the organization of private relationships. The main methodological criterion for choosing texts has been the potential richness of the material. The issues chosen for analysis are political participation, domestic violence, family policy (more specifically reconciliation), prostitution, integration and migration, antidiscrimination policy, and homosexual rights. The data include official laws and governmental or EU reports, parliamentary debates, media texts, expert texts, and NGO texts.

Based on our conceptual framework, sensitizing questions have been developed for both policy and gender dimensions, and 454 texts have been analyzed and translated into what is called a super-text. In contrast to the well-known concept of subtext (the implicit, unstated meaning of a text), a super-text is defined as a structured and systematic description of policy frames that makes this hidden significance explicit. MAGEEQ uses Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, namely Kwalitan ([www.kwalitan.net](http://www.kwalitan.net)) to assist in the administration of the qualitative analysis.

Our analysis shows a tremendous variety of meaning under the label of gender equality. Some early results have been documented in conference papers (see below). Some highlights include: Although MAGEEQ studies gender equality policies, it is not obvious that gender is at the core of the policy frames: there seem to be strong processes of de-gendering. Moreover, preliminary analysis has shown that underneath texts on gender equality there are frames on “retraditionalising gender roles” and stereotyped narrow conceptions of gender conceived as unchangeable.

Second, many gender equality issues are framed so that they seem to be located in the gendered division of labor. This is observable in the case of family policy, where the organization of personal relationships is seldom represented to be problematic in terms of gender inequality. Diagnoses of the division of unpaid labor or care as a problem are also rather scarce and seem to be found mainly in the 1990s (both at the level of member states and at the EU level). This could mean that since the 1990s the undervaluing of care and housework has almost never been addressed as part of gender equality policies.

Third, preliminary analysis shows that countries differ as to which actors are given a role in policies in their behalf (for example, prostitutes are rarely involved in the representation of diagnosis and prognosis of the problem of prostitution). Policies on domestic violence also differ significantly in their accents on either victims or perpetrators.

Finally, in many instances policies were very inconsistent in the balance between diagnosis and prognosis. The problem is attributed to society or to certain institutions, whereas the proposed measures address mainly women as individuals. Also it can be found that the diagnosis sees the problem as predominantly caused by material inequalities, whereas the prognosis refrains from any intervention in this field.

Although our analysis is still preliminary, anyone interested in the project is advised to consult the website. In addition to reports on gender equality policies in Austria, Greece , Hungary , the Netherlands , Slovenia and Spain , research papers by MAGEEQ project participants can be found on [www.mageeq.net](http://www.mageeq.net). These early results strengthen our dedication to the analysis and motivate us to search for a follow-up project which could attempt to explain the differences, shifts and inconsistencies found. The MAGEEQ project will run until the end of 2005.

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