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Policy Advocacy in Hard Times: The Impact of Economic Performance on Gendering Executive Attention

CLAIRE ANNESLEY, ISABELLE ENGELI, FRANCESCA GAINS and
SANDRA L. RESODIHARDJO

Securing executive attention for new policy demands is notoriously difficult as governmental agendas are crowded by established or 'core' policy issues. This article investigates whether it is harder for new and costly policy issues to reach the government agenda when the economy is performing badly. It examines whether, and the extent to which, costly gender equality issues regarding women's access to the labour market, equal treatment at work and care activities, are more likely to achieve executive attention when the economy is performing well. Using the Comparative Policy Agendas database, a systematic, quantitative analysis is conducted of when and why policies promoting sex equality in the division of labour reach executive agendas. The findings confirm that advocacy for costly gender equality measures is easier to make in times of economic growth. It is also found that female representation in parliament strengthens advocacy for executive attention and reduces friction on policy agenda change.

Achieving executive attention for new policy demands is notoriously difficult. Advocates of new and emerging political demands face considerable resistance to securing governmental attention for their issues. Governments can only provide limited attention to new demands and their agendas are crowded with core policy issues (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009; Jennings *et al.* 2011; Mortensen *et al.* 2011). The presence of cognitive and institutional 'friction' means that radical shifts away in issue attention are on the whole rare (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009). What is more, the capacity of advocates to push for new issues that are costly appears to diminish when the economy is not performing well (Annesley and Gains 2013; Mazur 1995). Despite this, new political demands do sometimes get processed and governments go public with new issues. When they do, these emerging issues have significant potential to 'destabilise' established issues and achieve prominence on government agendas (Baumgartner *et al.* 2011).

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While the links between public opinion and government action are multifaceted (Bara 2006; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Tresch *et al.* 2013), a prime example of a successful new social demand that has attracted executive attention is gender equality. While gender equality can in no way be considered a core component of governmental agendas, numerous issues related to gender equality have nevertheless succeeded in attracting executive attention across Western Europe since the 1960s (Mazur 2002; McBride and Mazur 2010). This significant achievement is even more noteworthy as some feminist demands – for instance, issues challenging the division of labour between men and women – are costly and thus involve substantial government resources (Mazur 2001). As such they are likely to invoke considerable friction and resistance to achieving executive attention, particularly when the economy is weak. This raises the question of when, how and why new and costly issues succeed in winning executive attention and become one of the issues to which government pays ‘serious attention’. Policies to promote gender equality are crucial in enhancing substantive democratic representation (Phillips 1995), yet little is known about how gender issues achieve executive attention (Kenney 2003). The bulk of gender and politics research has concentrated on policy outputs and the impact of women’s representation in parliament or women’s policy agencies on women-friendly policy outcomes (Childs 2004; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Lovenduski 2005; Mazur 2009; McBride and Mazur 2010; McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995). In addition, a great deal of this research tends to focus on policies such as reproduction rights, violence against women or women’s political representation which, we argue, invoke less competition and friction than do costly and redistributive issues related to gender equality such as the promotion of women’s access to the labour market. Recent research on the United Kingdom has pointed out the opportunities for advocating costly gender equality politics that are opened up by propitious economic circumstances (Annesley and Gains 2013). However, more cross-national research is required to fully investigate how and under what economic conditions gender equality gains executive attention.

This article contributes to the literature on agenda setting and issue attention processes by adopting a systematic and comparative focus on the determinants of executive attention to gender equality issues in four West European countries across time. We draw on the comparative agenda project (CAP) datasets on executive attention to all policy issues given in the governments’ annual statements of policy priorities and commitments over time (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009; Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006; Jennings *et al.* 2011; Mortensen *et al.* 2011). The CAP datasets on these annual executive speeches provide us with a unique comparative opportunity to investigate the dynamics of issue attention to gender equality over time and inclusion in the annual executive priorities speech is a good predictor of conversion to government legislation (Bevan *et al.* 2011).

In this article, we focus on gender equality issues that are potentially costly or redistributive and, as such, are likely to experience significant friction in reaching executive agendas. Although the promotion of gender equality addresses all dimensions of public and private lives (Htun and Weldon 2010), we focus here specifically on gender equality issues challenging the sexual division of labour: women's access to the labour market, equal treatment at work and childcare. Such issues are potentially costly and redistributive because they imply significant investment of limited governmental resources and the potential for fiscal redistribution. They make it possible for all women – not just wealthy women – to have an adequate independent income and access to support for caring and domestic responsibilities (Htun and Weldon 2010: 211). These issues constitute a 'hard case' for assessing the determinants of executive attention to the issue of gender equality. Being new and potentially costly, these demands are very likely to invoke considerable friction in getting government attention.

The article is structured as follows. To investigate why and when executives decide to dedicate attention to costly gender equality issues, we first set up three competing explanations, starting with the strength of the economy. We contrast our economic explanation with two others drawn from the gender and public policy literatures concerning women's representation in parliament, and the strength of social democratic politics. We then present our data and methods which identify the annual occurrence of executive attention to gender equality issues in the sexual division of labour in four European countries – Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK over the period 1960 to 2007 – by drawing on new data sets which address government agendas. We present and discuss our findings, which demonstrate the importance of economic growth and of women's political representation. In concluding we argue that advocacy for potentially costly gender equality measures is easier to make in times of economic growth and that women's stronger representation in parliament increases advocacy for executive attention and may act to reduce friction on policy agenda change.

Gendering Executive Agendas

We know that new policy issues struggle to reach governmental agendas because of the dominance of core issues and the presence of cognitive and institutional friction (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009). There is also evidence that costly or redistributive policy issues will be more likely to reach the agenda when economic performance is strong (Annesley and Gains 2013). In this section we expand on the possible explanations for why and when gender equality advocates overcome hurdles to secure their issues on governmental agendas. Indeed, how gender issues achieve executive attention has been under-researched so far in comparison with gender policy outputs (Kenney 2003). While focusing on the mechanisms explaining why and when executive attention is given to gender equality issues, we firstly examine arguments relating

to the impact of economic performance suggesting that new and costly policy demands – redistributive gender equality policies in our study – will have less chance of overcoming cognitive and institutional friction to reach the government agenda when the economy is not performing well. We then discuss two alternative explanations drawing on the gender and politics literature and investigate whether a strong presence of women in parliament or social democratic representation help advocates of costly gender equality to overcome governmental resistance to new issues.

Economic Performance

To date gender and politics research has predominantly focused on policies which seek to achieve a more equal gender representation in parliaments, for example through quotas (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Krook 2009; Lovenduski 2005), or on bringing attention to feminist policy issues otherwise ignored by the ‘mainstream’, such as abortion, prostitution, rape and domestic violence (Mackay 2010; Outshoorn 2004). Yet, as Htun and Weldon (2010: 211) rightly point out, these types of gender policy issues are less likely to invoke executive concerns about economic cost or redistribution than are issues relating to the ‘the state’s ability to ameliorate women’s burden in the sexual division of labour’.

Indeed, gender equality issues which seek to promote equality in the division of paid and unpaid labour are potentially costly or carry fiscally redistributive consequences. Advocates of such gender equality policies will therefore encounter the cognitive and institutional friction associated with getting new issues onto the governmental agenda and they will experience the additional friction that arises due to the cost of the proposals.

For example, McBeth *et al.* (2007: 88) describe how policy advocates construct narratives to identify ‘who wins and who loses’. Making arguments about potentially costly policies to address the sexual division of labour may be more difficult in hard economic times as advocates will face increased resistance to potentially redistributive policy initiatives. This might be because such measures may be seen as detrimental to economic competitiveness or officials might downgrade or drop possible policy agendas in response to changing public moods (Kingdon 1995).

This is a sorely under-researched issue. However, a first study on the determinants of costly gender equality policies reaching the governmental agenda in the UK found that this is more likely to occur when the economy is expanding (Annesley and Gains 2013). To test this economic explanation link further, the first hypothesis for this study is that *executives will pay more attention to gender equality issues when the economy is performing well* (H_1).

Women in Politics

Strong advocacy for new policy issues might help to overcome governmental resistance to new issue agendas. Indeed, in relation to new gender equality

issues, a growing body of gender and politics scholarship investigates whether a strong or growing presence of women in parliament is required to ensure substantive representation and can impact positively on political attention to gender issues, the gendering of policy debates, and the promotion of women-friendly policy outcomes.

Empirical research on gender and women's representation has investigated the impact of women's presence in political office at different stages of the policy process but still little is known about the impact of women's political representation on gendering executive attention. Studies have shown that women and men representatives differ significantly in their policy attitudes, with women tending to express more liberal positions and give higher priority to women's issues than men (Poggione 2004; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Thomas 1994). Research also demonstrates that female MPs gender the agenda-setting process in a decisive way by sponsoring bills on women's issues and broadening the overall agenda to include gender-related concerns, such as violence against women, that were previously overlooked (Bratton 2005; Burrell 1994; Carroll 2001; Celis 2008; Childs 2004; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Reingold 2000; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Swers 2005; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Thomas 1994).¹

These findings on the link between female political representation and women-friendly policy advocacy lead us to investigate whether the increasing presence of women in politics also exerts an impact on when and how governments respond to this advocacy and integrate gender equality issues in their publicly stated policy priorities. An increasing number of women representatives may increase overall parliamentary concerns about and advocacy for gender equality policies, including those which have redistributive consequences. Our second hypothesis, therefore, posits that *executives will pay more attention to gender equality issues as the number of female MPs rises* (H₂).

Social Democratic Politics

Our final set of arguments relate to party ideology. Not all women representatives are feminists or will be inclined to act for women. Indeed, there is a range of approaches to feminism and not all equate with redistributive gender equality as defined in this paper. Conservative and Christian Democratic politics tend to emphasise gender differences, promoting a traditional gender division of labour of a male breadwinner and unpaid female carer. Neo-liberal conservatism might encourage women into the labour market, but will not intervene via the welfare state to improve their financial independence, provide childcare or realign gender roles in the private household. Gender equality policy to promote women's economic independence and a fairer distribution of the sexual division of labour is more likely to be advocated by social democratic politics as part of an overarching political programme to reduce class-based inequality and promote equal citizenship (Buchanan and Annesley 2007). In numerous Western European countries, the second-wave feminist

movement developed ties with leftist parties which have in turn tended to show more support to women's movements than rightist ones (Mazur 2002; Waylen 2007).

The empirical literature on the link between party ideology and gender equality issues produced mixed findings. Engeli (2009, 2012), McBride Stetson (2001), Weldon (2002) as well as Htun and Weldon (2012) all conclude that social democratic politics do not matter as far as policies on reproductive rights and violence against women are concerned. On the contrary, Huber and Stephens (2000) found that left-wing parties play a decisive role, together with women's political mobilisation, on welfare goods and services provision. Bonoli and Reber (2010) as well as Morgan (2009) draw a similar conclusion when assessing the impact of leftist parties on childcare spending, equal employment and caring policies. In contrast, Kittilson (2008) finds no significant effect of leftist government on maternity and childcare leave policy across 19 post-industrialised countries.

This body of work suggests that gender equality policies focusing on improving women's financial independence and a better work–care balance may be associated with left-wing parties. As a result, the final hypothesis can be formulated: *Strong social democratic representation in parliament will increase executive attention to gender equality issues* (H₃).

Data and Methods

To examine comparative patterns in gendering executive attention to costly gender equality issues regarding the labour market and caring activities, we use the Comparative Agendas Project datasets on national government agendas. Drawing on a common policy issue classification of government attention across political systems, the CAP datasets allows for comprehensive and reliable comparative measure of publicly stated executive agendas across issues, countries and venues (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009, 2011; Bevan *et al.* 2011; Breeman *et al.* 2009; Jennings *et al.* 2011; Mortensen *et al.* 2011). The government agendas analysed in this article are the annual statements of policy priorities and commitments in executive speeches in Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom over the period 1961–2007: the Queen's Speech for the UK² (Jennings *et al.* 2010) and the Netherlands (Breeman *et al.* 2009), the so-called 'messages' from the Swiss government³ (Varone *et al.* 2014) and the prime minister's annual addresses to the parliament in Denmark (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010).⁴ The comparative design strategy adopted here does not follow either a most-similar or most-different systems strategy *stricto sensu* but constitutes an availability-based selection of countries which aims at maximising variation on the dependent variable (that is, years when there is executive attention to costly gender equality policies) as well as on the three main explanatory factors across time and countries: women's representation in parliament, strength of Social Democrats, and economic performance.

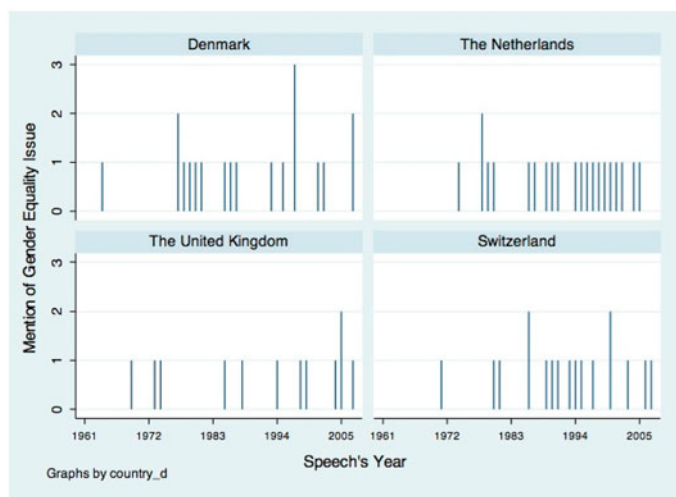
The Danish, Dutch and UK speeches are delivered by the titular head of state or the prime minister in Denmark and state the executive legislative intent for the forthcoming parliamentary session. The messages of the Swiss government are delivered during the year by the minister in charge and present the upcoming legislative intent of the government. Even though these government statements present some cross-national differences in format, they nevertheless all reflect the policy intentions of the cabinet for the coming year. As such, they constitute a reliable comparative measure of the policy issues that governments choose to politically emphasise and give priority to (Bara 2006; Baumgartner *et al.* 2009; Bevan *et al.* 2011; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Jennings *et al.* 2011; Mortensen *et al.* 2011). As discussed by Breeman *et al.* (2009) and Jennings *et al.* (2011), speeches vary regarding ceremonial and symbolic statements across countries as well as regarding the overall size, the UK speeches being more concise than the Dutch ones for instance. The analysis presented in this article focuses only on the substantive mentions of gender equality at work and in caring activities. When issues promoting gender equality are mentioned in the speeches, it means that governments have decided to pay serious attention to them at that particular time and include them in the set of priorities that they want to publicise (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Kingdon 1995). Taking into account the considerable number of competing issues to which the government has to dedicate its limited capacity of attention, appearances of gender equality issues in executive speeches constitute, as such, hard cases of gendering executive attention.

During the time period under investigation – 1961–2007 – the overall promotion of gender equality at work and in caring activities is relatively limited. We have included all the mentions regarding (1) the promotion of women's participation in the labour 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 childcare programmes and the introduction of maternity/paternity/parental leave; as well as (4) the removal of discrimination against women in pension schemes and unemployment benefits.⁵

Figure 1 plots mentions of gender equality at work and in caring activities in these speeches over time for a preliminary examination of country trends across time (count number of mentions per year and country). The country figures show that gender equality issues do not constitute a core policy issue to which governments devote constant attention across time. In the four countries, gender equality related to work and caring activities constitutes an issue of secondary importance for most governments: it is only mentioned 69 times in the four countries altogether. In several years it is even not mentioned at all.⁶

The assumption in the public policy and gender literature that achieving political change is hard and integrating new issues, such as gender equality, into established political agendas is harder still appears to be borne out

FIGURE 1
 MENTIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES REGARDING THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF
 LABOUR ON PUBLICLY STATED GOVERNMENT AGENDAS PER YEAR AND COUNTRY



(Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner *et al.* 2008; Mazur 2002). Indeed, executive attention to gender equality was, at best, sporadic until the end of the 1970s and only increased thereafter, the UK being on a notably slow track until the mid-1990s.

Figure 1 also reveals that issues regarding gender equality at the workplace and in caring activities are rather scarce in the speeches. If mentioned at all, they mostly appeared only once per speech.⁷ This gives strong confidence of reliability in the comparability of the measure of attention to gender equality. We have therefore decided to create a binary time-series cross-sectional (BTSCS) dependent variable which is coded 1 in a given year when the promotion of gender equality regarding the sexual division of labour is mentioned at least once in the cabinet agenda, and 0 otherwise. To assess the determinants in gendering executive agendas across time and space, we construct a pooled binary time-series cross-section (Beck and Katz 1995) dataset from the four countries over 47 years (1961–2007); that is, 187 country-year observations, where each observation represents one country at one year.⁸ The remaining part of this section presents the operationalisation of the independent and control variables and model specification.

Operationalisation and Model Specification

Economic performance. Gender issues promoting gender equality in the division of labour imply significant government resources and economic consequences, which can fall on governments, employers and individuals.

Good economic performance can therefore facilitate gender issues' access and encourage the executive to promote them publicly in their speeches (H_1). To estimate the effect of economic performance, we include two key indicators: percentage change in growth of real GDP and unemployment rates as a percentage of the civilian labour force. As policy intent appearing on governmental agendas tends to reflect argumentation within the executive taking place during the preceding months, the two economic indicators are lagged by one year in order to better reflect the speed with which economic performance is generally taken into account in setting governmental priorities for the following years (for data sources, see Table 1).⁹

Women in power. The next explanation relies on the argument that increasing women's representation in politics positively impacts on political attention regarding gender issues (H_2). To 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.

Social democratic politics. The literature points out that gender equality issues addressing women's economic independence and care activities is more likely to be advocated by social democratic political parties (H_3). To measure the parliamentary strength of the Social Democrats, we use the percentage of social democratic seats in the lower or single house at the time when the speech was delivered.¹⁰

Finally, we add a series of control variables in the model. First, the gender and politics literature argues that social democratic attention paid to gender equality may be driven by electoral considerations. To control for a vote-seeking strategy, we include a dichotomous variable measuring parliamentary election years. Second, the national pattern in promoting gender equality may be influenced by international norms. To control for such an effect, we include a dichotomous variable measuring whether the country has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Eliminations of All Forms of Discrimination

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND DATA SOURCES

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Source
Percentage of seats held by women in the lower or single house	16.06	11.33	http://www.ipu.org/
Percentage of Social Democrat seats in the lower or single house	31.12	7.33	Armingeon <i>et al.</i> (2012)
One-year lag percentage change in growth of real GDP	2.74	2.19	Armingeon <i>et al.</i> (2012)
One-year lag unemployment rates as percentage of civilian labour force	4.32	3.42	Armingeon <i>et al.</i> (2012)
Elections (1 for elections year, 0 otherwise)	0.29	0.49	Armingeon <i>et al.</i> (2012)
CEDAW (1 for years following ratification, 0 otherwise)	0.40	0.49	http://www.un.org

against Women (CEDAW) at the time the governmental speech is delivered. Finally, to control for the 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).¹¹

To select the appropriate regression model for our binary time-series cross-sectional dataset, we first compared a series of alternative models – binomial logit model, panel random effect logit model and panel fixed effect logit model – and checked for the importance of the panel-level variance and unit heterogeneity (likelihood-ratio test of rho, Hausman test). For both series of tests, the null hypothesis could not have been rejected. In other terms, the tests did not indicate that a panel logit model (with random effects or fixed effects) would provide a more consistent estimation than a binomial logit model. Accordingly, we have selected a pooled binomial logit model with robust standard errors and country dummies to add an additional control for country effect, the model being easier to interpret. To double-check the robustness of the pooled model results against the impact of cross-sectional outliers, we have estimated jackknifed standard errors (Efron and Tibshirani 1994; Kittel and Winner 2005).

The interpretation of the results of logistic models requires caution (see Long 1997). We begin by discussing the regression coefficients, and then concentrate on the predicted probabilities which were simulated with *Clarify 2.1* software (King and Zeng 2001).

Results

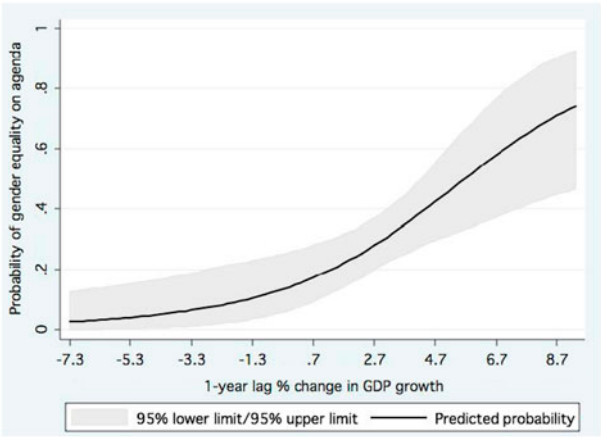
Our first hypothesis proposes that it is easier to get gender equality issues carrying significant economic consequences onto the policy agenda when the economy is performing well (H_1), as promoting gender equality at the workplace and a better balance in care responsibilities between genders usually implies financial consequences.

The estimated coefficients presented in Table 2 support this hypothesis to a certain extent. Indeed, a rise in GDP growth enables executive attention to gender equality issues. In addition, while being statistically non-significant, the coefficient regarding the impact of unemployment nevertheless indicates a negative relationship between the rise in unemployment rate and the likelihood of gendering executive attention. Figure 2 displays the simulated probabilities of the GDP growth effect. Whilst it appears that some costly measures for the promotion of gender equality were implemented in hard economic times, notably in the Netherlands and in Switzerland, a growing GDP impacts positively on the likelihood of mentioning the promotion of gender equality in governmental addresses. This finding suggests support for the expectation that feminist advocates and executive actors are more likely to succeed in pressing for potentially costly and redistributive gender equality issues and less likely to face resistance and cognitive friction when the economic climate is perceived to be good. In contrast, while the coefficient points in the expected direction, falling levels of unemployment do not exert any significant impact on

TABLE 2
ESTIMATED COEFFICIENTS, BINOMIAL LOGIT

Gender equality issue on executive policy agenda	Estimated coefficients (jackknife std. Err.)
Women in parliament (H_1)	0.057* (0.027)
% Social Democrats in parliament (H_2)	0.020 (0.037)
L_ GDP (H_3)	0.456** (0.152)
L_ Unemployment (H_3)	-0.017 (0.089)
CEDAW	-1.973** (0.738)
Elections year	-0.023 (0.444)
Constant	-9.081 (4.21)
Logpseudolikelihood	-91.249
McFadden's R^2	0.221
N	187

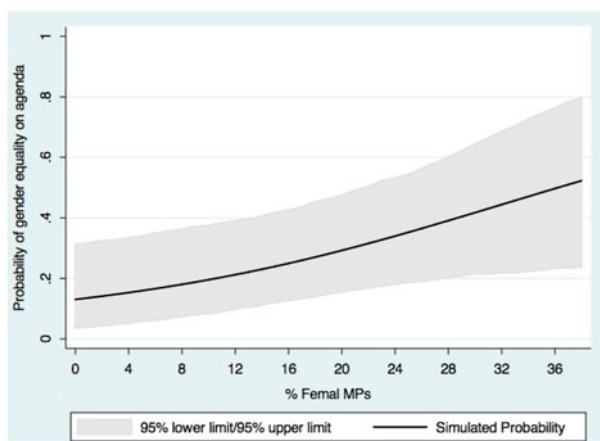
FIGURE 2
EFFECT OF PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN GROWTH OF REAL GDP, PREDICTED
PROBABILITIES (OTHER FACTORS SET AT THE MEAN)



promoting gender equality on governmental agendas. This may reflect the fact that some measures to tackle sex inequality in the labour market flow from executive concern to increase labour market participation when unemployment is high rather than flowing from feminist advocacy.

Our second hypothesis (H_2) was drawn from the argument that women's increased formal representation in legislatures would in turn enhance women's substantive representation by promoting (here) higher attention to costly gender equality issues on executive agendas. Indeed, our analysis shows that women's representation in parliament matters for gaining more government attention to redistributive gender equality issues. As Figure 3 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 labour on executive agendas. 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 across countries and policy domains.

FIGURE 3
EFFECT OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT, PREDICTED PROBABILITIES (OTHER FACTORS
SET AT THE MEAN)



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.

Turning to the third explanation, we examine whether party politics matters for gendering the policy agenda (H_3) as the impact of social democratic politicians as allies to the women's movement for the promotion of gender equality is debated in the literature. Our systematic analysis of executive agendas does not indicate strong support for this third hypothesis. The strength of the Social Democrats in the lower or single house of parliament is positive but not statistically significant. In additional analysis, we also tested the effect of a left-wing cabinet on gendering the agenda (excluding Switzerland and its permanent coalition composed by the same four parties) and the effect was consistently insignificant. If the Social Democrats have sponsored key policies promoting gender equality, the other parties did so as well. Having strong left-wing representation in parliament or a left-wing cabinet does not give a strong assurance that gender equality will rank higher in governmental priorities. Finally, as political parties may emphasise gender equality for vote-seeking reasons, a control variable was integrated into the model to capture any effect related to upcoming elections. It turned out to be insignificant. The election context does not incite political parties in power to place more public emphasis on gender equality issues in their annual executive speeches.

Conclusion

Using the Comparative Policy Agendas data, we find that costly or redistributive gender equality policies – those which challenge the traditional division of

labour between men and women – have succeeded in reaching governmental agendas in a range of Western European states since the 1960s. In explaining why, we find strong support for the idea that the economy matters. More specifically, whether or not the economy is growing may play a role in determining whether costly, non-core issues can find their way onto government agendas. This finding will be of great significance for advocates of gender equality in the context of the current economic downturn across Western Europe.

We also find support for the argument that the advocacy of women representatives matters. There is a statistically significant relationship between the number of female MPs and the presence of gender equality initiatives to address sex inequalities in paid and unpaid work on government agendas. 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 supports the idea that rising numbers of women MPs does increase advocacy for executive attention and reduces the cognitive friction on policy agenda change. This finding is of direct relevance for ongoing debates about women's under-representation in Western European parliaments and the difference that female MPs can make.

Our findings on the relationship between social democratic politics and support for gender equality issues to address sex inequalities in formal and informal work was less clear-cut and continues to reflect ambiguity in the wider literature around the relationship between left-wing politics and gender equality. Our focus in this article was on examining the potentially costly gender equality issues which promote equality in the distribution of paid and unpaid work. Thus we examined government attention to issues addressing both equality in the formal workplace, traditionally the concern of social democratic politics, but also issues around support for informal care. We suggest that future examination of gender equality policies will benefit from a more fine-grained analysis of the relationship between left-wing politics and a wider range of gender equality policies to see if there are differences in the strength of social democratic advocacy across a range of gender equality issues.

As such our research makes a series of contributions to the literature on agenda setting as well as to the gender and politics scholarship. While it is notoriously hard for new policy issues to overcome cognitive and institutional friction, to disrupt established policy agendas and to become one of the issues to which governments pay serious attention, our study of gender equality policy shows that, under the right circumstances, this is possible. Advocacy – here in the form of female presence in parliament – helps to overcome some friction for new issues. And strong economic performance – here GDP growth – helps to overcome additional resistance to costly measures.

As well as gendering the policy agendas scholarship, we make an invaluable contribution to the gender and politics scholarship. Our study helps to make sense of the crucial first step of the policy-making process, rather than the policy outputs phase, and we contribute to the scholarship on gender policy

by differentiating between the determinants of redistributive policies and ones which address the status of women. This raises the question of whether these determinants of attention to the gender equality issue are also found across the wider set of gender equality policy domains.

In placing a focus on gender equality our research has taken an important first step in gendering the highly esteemed Comparative Agendas Project data and making it accessible to scholars who seek to assess government attention to gender equality issues. In concluding, we highlight the need for further research into the determinants of issue attention across both costly and non-costly gender equality demands.

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Notes

1. Another strand of research has highlighted the positive role of women's policy agencies in promoting women-friendly policy outputs (see for instance McBride and Mazur 2010; McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995 as well as Weldon 2002).
2. More generally known as the Speech from the Throne or as the King's Speech during the reign of a male monarch. UK Data Archives at Essex: *SN 6974 – Legislative Policy Agendas in the United Kingdom, 1910–2010*.
3. Output of the project Agenda Setting in Switzerland funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Ref. 105,511-119,245/1).
4. The four datasets were built up following the same master codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project. Each sentence or quasi-sentence was coded according to the coding scheme, with the exception of Switzerland for which the topic of the messages was used for the coding unit.
5. While focusing on gender equality regarding economic issues, we do not, therefore, attempt to assess the determinants of government attention to other aspects of gender equality related to, for instance, reproductive rights or domestic violence.
6. To give a general sense of the scarce attention dedicated to these gender equality issues, it is interesting to note that the mentions represent 0.29 per cent of the total mentions in the Dutch speeches, 0.33 per cent of the British speeches and 0.15 per cent of the Danish speeches.
7. Gender equality regarding work and caring activities is mentioned twice in six speeches and three times in only one speech.
8. The Danish prime minister's speech for the year 1971 has been excluded from the analysis. Parliamentary elections took place a couple of weeks before the speech, which was delivered by the former prime minister heading the caretaker cabinet until the new coalition was formed. As the 1971 elections led to a drastic change in the party composition of the cabinet, it cannot be assumed that the speech reflects accurately the dynamics of attention of either the former cabinet or the succeeding one.
9. There is no longitudinal comparative data available regarding women's participation in the workforce for the 1960s and 1970s. We have run analysis for the period where these data are available. The coefficient did not prove to be significant. We thus opted for preserving the longitudinal perspective from the beginning of the 1960s. The lack of longitudinal data for a

sufficiently long period of time also prevented us from examining measures regarding public opinion toward the economy.

10. Cabinet shares held by Social Democrats is a common alternative measure used in the literature. Two main reasons have motivated our choice. First, the Social Democrats are systematically holding two seats (out of seven) in the Swiss permanent coalition cabinet. Relying on cabinet shares in the analysis would have resulted in artificial stability over time. Second, as Bonoli and Reber (2010) argue, opposition can play an important role in multi-party systems in vetoing policy proposals from a weakened government and push for placing issues upon the agenda. In an additional model excluding the Swiss observations, we substituted the cabinet share for the parliamentary seat share. As the results remained largely similar, we have opted for the parliamentary seat share in order to allow for as much variation as possible regarding the Swiss observations.
11. Carter and Signorino (2010) demonstrate that the use of a cubic polynomial of time performs as well as the natural cubic splines developed by Beck *et al.* 1998. In order to save space, we do not report time and country dummy coefficients in Table 2.

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