

Europe and what lies beyond

In response to Alison E. Woodward

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Abstract

Margit van der Steen comments on Alison Woodward’s article “Travels, triangles and transformations”. Woodward’s reflections, she argues, would benefit from defining concepts more precisely. She also argues for a more in-depth analysis of the historical and political situation in which the triangle in the EU originated. Especially the early activities of the United Nations should be taken into consideration, as well as the fall of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent introduction of Eastern European countries into the EU. Finally, it can be questioned whether the policy makers during the velvet triangle ‘years’ were the most successful generation of officers.

Keywords: policy networks, women’s movement, gender equality policy, European Union (EU), Velvet Triangle, feminism

Alison Woodward reflects in her article “Travels, triangles and transformations: Implications for new agendas in gender equality policy” upon feminist issues related to the travel of policy ideas and the confrontations between feminist academic theory, women’s and gender movements, and the policy world. She explores the relevance of triangular formation and the transformations that have occurred in policy making since the emergence of the concept of ‘velvet triangle’ in the late nineties. Since I have been active in this field as an academic and as a practitioner, working, for instance, as one of the founders of the *European Journal of Women’s Studies* and as delegate of the Dutch government to the General Assembly of the United Nations, I would like to make some comments on her analysis.

What first strikes me in her essay is the a-historical way in which she uses concepts such as ‘feminism’, ‘gender equality’, and ‘intersectionality’.

Especially in an essay on the travelling and transformation of ideas, concepts should be described carefully. As the concepts have been developed and used in specific political and historical contexts, definitions matter. Woodward, for instance, states that we need 'a return to the idea of gender justice rather than simple emancipation'. Here, she could have explained what is the difference between these two notions precisely and why gender justice should be preferred to emancipation. Feminism, too, to name but one example, is a concept with a history in itself.

Furthermore, the value judgements Woodward expresses when describing experts and policy makers in the velvet triangle can be questioned. She speaks about the 'reliable' experts who were thrown out of the Rolodexes in Brussels after 2007. These experts, 'knowledgeable and connected feminists', were replaced by 'normal' actors. By using words such as 'reliable', she suggests that the members of the velvet triangle were better policy officers. But, she does not make explicit why a younger generation is not that capable of promoting gender equality. What is more, as Joke Swiebel also mentions, the most important EU legislation dates from the seventies, before the velvet triangle even existed.

This brings me to my third remark concerning life cycles. Social scientists discern three phases in the life cycle of organisations and movements: birth, consolidation, and, finally, stagnation or even death. Woodward focuses only on the second and third phase. As such, she neglects a crucial element: the first phase. Woodward states that, to be able to understand the decline of movements, it is necessary to look at changes in the context. It is also essential, however, to understand the historical and political situation in which the triangle originated. Here it is important to note – and this is my fourth comment – that this context involves more than the EU and that a longer period of time needs to be considered as well. To illustrate my argument, I will reflect on some international and historical aspects.

Woodward takes the EU dimension of the velvet triangle for granted, but this needs further investigation. How and why could gender equality policy and women's studies in the EU develop? Why did the EU, instead of national or local contexts or other international settings, become so dominant? In order to understand this, we need to go back in time. It can then be seen that the international context involved more than just the EU. The United Nations also developed relevant policies such as, for instance, the Forward Looking Strategies of the U.N. Nairobi Conference and the Beijing Platform for Action. During U.N. conferences, activists, policy makers, politicians, and academics from all over the globe gathered in formal and

informal meetings and influenced each other. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the EU and the U.N. used different concepts and definitions. While the European Union spoke about equal opportunities, the United Nations advocated empowerment of women and elimination of discrimination. Although the U.N. was influential, it was the EU, with its focus on equal opportunities (especially in the labour market), that became most important. But, to understand the development of the velvet triangle, U.N. policies should be considered as well.

The U.N. Copenhagen conference (1980) laid the foundations for the oldest European women's studies association, WISE. But, for the further development of WISE – and especially for the first European academic journal, the *European Journal of Women's Studies (EJWS)* – the breakdown of the Berlin Wall was essential. Before 1989, there were hardly any contacts between Eastern and Western European feminists and women's studies researchers. The opening of the Iron Curtain offered a tremendous opportunity to start cooperation (Editorial, 1994; Jasser, Van der Steen, & Verloo, 1995). This was difficult in the beginning. Eastern European regimes had not encouraged scientific cooperation with academics outside the communist world. As a result, different research and publication traditions existed in the two parts of Europe. In the Western European dominated editorial board of the *EJWS*, for instance, we had many discussions about the inclusion of Eastern European contributions. It was hard to obtain articles from this region and, at first, many Eastern European authors did not meet the standards of international academic journals. Because of these difficulties as well, it took several years before the first volume of *EJWS* could be published by SAGE in 1994.

Next to the stimulus of the U.N. and political developments in Europe, support from especially Dutch policy makers, such as, for instance, Ilja Mottier, was important for the internationalisation of women's studies. But, there was help from more parties, such as private foundations. The Ford Foundation and SOROS are good examples of organisations that contributed, especially by means of funding. The EU did support women's studies projects and networks, but that was also the result of earlier initiatives of the women's studies community itself. A three year lobby, for instance, conducted by WISE, resulted in the inclusion of gender in EU science policy. As Woodward demonstrates, the results of this lobby are relevant until this very day and are still visible in the EU Research and Innovation programme HORIZON 2020 (Van der Steen, 1998; Hoogland & Van der Steen, 1998).

With this very brief overview, I wish to demonstrate that EU-coopera-

tion in the velvet triangle was born out of specific historical and political circumstances – which could have had a different outcome as well. Now, in the 21st century, the political context has changed once more. According to Woodward, the times have gotten harder. But, it should not be forgotten that resistance towards gender equality is not new. Today, there are different adversaries, new feminist agendas, and another generation of policy-makers, academics, and activists. There are still serious problems that need to be tackled, such as unequal pay and gender based violence. But, in the same way as there were feminist advocates outside the European Union before the mid-1990s, it is to be expected that today, too, actors from new generations with new strategies will emerge to tackle contemporary issues.

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