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EDITORIAL

Editor's Note 22 (3)

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This roundtable issue is close to my heart, given that it comes out of one of my own major areas of research—state feminism and gender equality policy machineries (GEMs). Since 1995, I have conducted research and published on state feminism, first in France, and then on comparative state feminism through an international research group I co-convened with Dorothy McBride, the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State. Most recently, I have conducted a study of GEMs in the participating states of the Organization of Security and Cooperation of Europe for the OSCE, including France, through its own GEM—ODIHR (see a summary of the report in my essay in this roundtable issue).

The core of my research agenda came out of my dissertation research on French equal employment policy—égalité professionnelle—with the central role of the national-level women's policy offices, in particular, the powerful Roudy Ministry under Mitterrand. Thus, in a way, this roundtable issue commemorates French state feminism and the GEMs that still persist at the national and territorial levels in France since they were first put in place in the mid-1960s and early 1970s starting with the Comité du Travail Féminin. However, this is not a roundtable on French state feminism. Rather, it is on the expanding scope of comparative state feminism research across the globe that goes well beyond the earlier purview of research on Western countries.

Summer Forester, a leading scholar of gender and politics in Middle East, and I sought to tap into a new generation of comparative research on state feminism that pushed the boundaries of previous work into other parts of the world with more intersectional perspectives. The issue of democratic backlash and back sliding and the role of GEMs in these fast-moving processes was also at the forefront of our agenda for a half-day short course we held at APSA in Los Angeles just a year ago, organized through the FPG-AFSP associate group of APSA.

We invited scholars from a range of countries who used a variety of approaches to discuss what they saw as the future agenda for research on state feminism in the context of the challenges of the twenty-first century. We were thrilled to have a highly successful short course. We were even more delighted when participants

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agreed to contribute essays to this roundtable issue based on the interventions at the short course. The nine contributions from some of the top scholars of comparative gender and politics capture the energy and essence of the current research on GEMs through a hands-on and often applied discussion of new directions for state feminism research; agendas that are equally salient for western established democracies as well as emerging and struggling democracies in the global south; hence, suitable for work on France as well.

Jump to the end of this issue to see what is on tap for this year's APSA meetings through the FPG-AFSP group—a roundtable discussion of international research on freedom of speech and censorship issues in higher education—a hot issue in today's highly politically charged world.

Thanks, and for this issue, go to Summer Forester for her able editorial leadership and to the nine contributors from Mexico, Canada, and the USA who participated in the short course and worked with Summer to produce focused and high-quality essays. Taken together, this issue should give a wealth of scholarly fuel to researchers interested in gender, politics, and the state both inside and outside of France.

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ROUNDTABLE

Introduction to the roundtable: emerging research agendas for state feminism in the age of democratic reversal

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is twofold: to introduce the eight contributions to this roundtable issue and to place them in the context of international and comparative research on gender equality machineries (GEMs) and state feminism in the twenty-first century and to present the overall agenda for state feminism research in the future that is suggested by these contributions. We first show how the roundtable effort came out of this journal's connections to the American Political Science Association's Partner Group on French Politics and the scholarly rationale for the structure of the roundtable. Next, we take a deeper dive into the role and evolution of gender equality machineries, also referred to as women's policy agencies and institutional mechanisms for gender equality. The third section presents how the concept of state feminism has been developed as an object of study in the international research community. It is followed by a discussion of French work on state feminism. We end the essay with a reflection about the research themes, agenda, and next steps suggested by this collection of eight articles.

Keywords State Feminism · Women's Policy Machineries · Gender Equality Machineries · Comparative Research Agenda

Feminist researchers from across the globe have looked at women's policy agencies and the prospects for state feminism. With increasing dialog and collaboration, these scholars today form a community that has the capacity to sustain a global research agenda (McBride and Mazur 2013: 654).

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Introduction

As the quote above indicates, a large community of researchers across the globe had emerged by 2013 to study "… state-based structures at all levels and across all formal government areas assigned to promote the rights status and condition of women or strike down gender-based hierarchies (Ibid.)." In these challenging times for gender equality and democracy, the complex and variegated governmental structures have an important role in preventing the reversal of gender equality in practice and political backlash. As "critical actors"[1] in promoting gender equality policy, gender equality machineries (GEMs) have the potential to compel governments to keep gender equality at the top of their agendas and are a major vector for gender mainstreaming and more targeted approaches to policy areas crucial for gender balance throughout society. They also partner with women's civil society organization to give voice to the unheard to better achieve their complex policy goals through "state feminism."

As various international and comparative studies on gender equality agencies have shown (UN 2010, 2020; EIGE 2014; OSCE 2023; McBride and Mazur 2010), these state-based structures are a major conduit for democracy, often through substantive and descriptive representation of women's interests in their full intersectional complexity. GEMs do this through making stable democracies more democratic and playing a key role in the shifts between autocracy and democracy in countries where democratic institutions are more fragile. In the current age of democratic backsliding and reversal, they have also become targets for extreme right-wing and anti-democratic movements and backlash. This roundtable issue seeks to contribute to this body of work and collective of scholars by identifying the emerging research agenda for these highly critical actors in the early twenty-first century with the rising tide of anti-democratic, populist, and extreme right political forces inside and outside of government that threaten over 40 years of gender equality policy and institutions.

The goal of this essay is twofold: to introduce the eight contributions to this roundtable issue and to place them in the context of international and comparative research on GEMs's and state feminism and to present the overall agenda for state feminism research in the future that is suggested by these contributions. In the rest of our piece, we first show how this roundtable effort came out of this journal's connections to the American Political Science Association's Partner Group on French Politics and the scholarly rationale for the structure of the roundtable. Next, we take a deeper dive into the role and evolution of gender equality machineries, also referred to as women's policy agencies and institutional mechanisms for gender equality. The third section presents how the concept of state feminism evolved as an object of study in the international research community. We move then to a discussion of work on state feminism in France. We end the essay with a reflection about

[1] First developed in the context of studying the impact of women legislators, for example in Childs and Krook (2009), the concept of critical actors has been also applied to GEMs (e.g., OSCE 2023).

the research themes, agenda, and next steps suggested by this collection of eight articles.

Context and scholarly rationale for the roundtable structure

The roundtable issue comes out of a short course organized at the American Political Science Association Meetings in Los Angeles in 2023 through the French Politics Group-Association Science Politiqu Française partner group of APSA. We sought "to bring together leading experts of gender equality machineries across the globe to identify and discuss the current research agenda for studying these complex and crucial institutions." Following a lively half day discussion, we all agreed to take advantage of the roundtable format of *French Politics* to develop some of the interventions from the short course into short essays on emerging research agendas from across the globe to move forward research on GEMs and State Feminism.

The roundtable brings together experts of gender equality machineries that represent the full global diversity of the research community who work on state feminism. In addition, as with most gender and policy experts, many have worked as consultants for government agencies and in some cases for GEMs.

Mona Tajali was trained in Canada, the USA and the UK, currently has a position at Stanford and focusses on gender equality and women's empowerment in Turkey and Iran. Simon Bohn is based at York University in Canada and is originally from Brazil. Her focus is Latin America and the Caribbean with a specific expertise in gender politics in Brazil. Gisela Zaremberg, born and educated in Argentina, works at FLASCO in Mexico and has written extensively on gender politics and policy in Latin America. S. Laurel Weldon is Canadian and trained in the USA and works at Simon Fraser University. She has been the leader of a major international project on women's movements across the globe. Amy G. Mazur trained in France and the USA is based at Sciences Po Paris and Washington State University. She is an expert of state feminism in France but also has headed up two larger international research projects on state feminism: the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State with Dorothy McBride, 1995–2011 and the OSCE study discussed in this roundtable issue. The rest of the contributors are trained and based in the USA–Ashley English at University of North Texas specializes in gender, policy, and politics in the USA; Candice Ortbals based at Pepperdine University is an expert of state feminism in Spain and Summer Forester at Carleton College specializes in feminist politics in the Middle East with a particular focus on Jordan.

The structure for the roundtable seeks to maximize the contributions of the eight essays not only to understand the dynamics and determinants of GEMs and state feminism in the context of democratic backsliding, but also to engage with the larger research agenda of state feminism since scholars first coined the phrase in the 1980s. While earlier research and comparative research projects on state feminism, like RNGS, tended to only focus on the western postindustrial democracies, there have been strong calls for more global research that goes beyond the West (Mazur 2022 and Lombardo and Meier 2022).

In the first section, larger comparative research issues are considered that span the entire globe allowing for better "traveling (Sartori 1970)" of the concept of state feminism to regions and countries outside of the west and across more complex sub-national, national transnational, and international levels. S. Laurel Weldon, in "State Feminism, Global Feminist Waves, and Democratic Backsliding: Global and Cross-National Research Agendas," starts the discussion with identifying the links between women's policy agencies and feminist movements in the emerging international and comparative research agenda of state feminism and the effect of democratic reversal across the globe. Amy G. Mazur next, in "Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Equality as Catalysts and Critical Actors: Findings, Recommendations and Research Agenda from the OSCE Review," presents the findings of and research agenda from a recent cross-national mixed methods she did in collaboration with the Organization of Security and Cooperation of Europe. The study highlights the key role of GEMs in protecting gender equality in the time of democratic backsliding in 42 participating member states of the OSCE; thus not only postindustrial democracies.

Mona Tajali, in "State Gender Ideology and National Women's Machinery: A Necessary Shift in Focus," discusses how to study backlash and state feminism through a feminist institutionalist approach that examines the impact of anti-feminist gender ideologies by state actors in more autocratic settings. Simone Bohn's piece, "Gender Equality Machineries: The Quest for Enhanced Gender Data," ends this comparative section with a discussion of the crucial role of GEMs in collecting "gender data" at all levels of society for staving off the anti-gender critique of state feminism and the need to develop this crucial function of data collection.

The next two sections provide a more detailed view of research agendas from specific regions and countries first from the Global South and then from the Global North. Gisela Zaremberg, in "Gender Equality Machinery (GEM) and Democratic Reversal: Research Agendas in Latin America," takes a regional perspective and Summer Forester in "Anti-Democratic Maneuvers and State Feminism in Jordan: Lessons for Research in an Autocratic Context" a country-based approach. Two essays then treat the Global North. First, Candice Ortbals in, "Rhetorical Attacks on Women's Policy Machineries in Spain: Lessons for Studying the New Backlash" shows one way of studying the backlash through the discourse used by the populist party VOX in its campaign against GEMS in Spain. Ashley English ends the roundtable with a detailed project for addressing the lack of attention to GEMs in the US context in "Women's Policy Machineries and Representation In the USA: Towards Filling the Empirical Gaps."

Defining gender equality machinery: the three waves of women's policy agencies

Women's policy agencies first appeared in the early twentieth century, but it was the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women in 1947 and the International Women's Year (IWY) Conference process in the 1970s that provided a template for their creation and functioning. At the same time, agencies were a product of the efforts of national governments to address women's movement demands from the 1960s to the present. Looking at the establishment of agencies, scholars identify

three stages that followed the initiative of the UN women's policy process and the ebbs and flows of women's movements (Rai 2003; McBride and Mazur 2013).

In the first wave, prior to the 1970s, a handful of women's policy agencies were set up in Western democracies; for example, the Women's Bureau in the USA created in 1920, the Women's Bureau in Canada created in 1954, and the Study Group on Women's Work in France created in 1965. Such offices were focused on the status or condition of women and women's issues, most often in the area of employment. Following the first UN conference

in Mexico City in 1975, which called for countries to establish women's policy machinery, and the explosion of women's movements in Western countries governments responded by systematically setting up more agencies.

By the mid-1980s all Western countries and by the mid-1990s 127 countries across the globe had national offices. This second wave of women's policy agency growth coincided with a trend toward focusing on gender equality rather than women's condition alone; thus, agencies started to be referred to as gender equality machineries rather than WPAs. A part of this second stage of development was the pursuit of gender mainstreaming—incorporating

a gender perspective into all areas of policy—a charge usually, but not always, given to the women's policy agencies. The link between gender mainstreaming and women's policy agencies, once again, clearly came from the international arena—the United Nations as well as other international organizations.

In the final phase, beginning in the late 1990s and particularly in Western European countries, agencies shifted from a focus on women and gender toward diversity goals with responsibility for inequalities due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and disability. The trend toward diversity agencies also coincided with a scholarly shift toward assessing intersectionality, that is, how different systems of oppression intersect to produce variation in effects for groups of women from different ethnic backgrounds and with various socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., Mugge et al. 2018). This trend has provided both opportunities and challenges for addressing issues of gender equality. In the USA, on the one hand, the women's movement benefited from the wide reach of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission because it could base its claims for gender equality on effective legal arguments for race equality. In the French case, on the other hand, the establishment of an authority that incorporates all forms of discrimination coincided with the downgrading of developed women's policy machinery at the national and subnational levels (Lépinard and Mazur 2009).

The study of state feminism since the 1980s

In the late 1960s and 1970's, women in postindustrial democratic countries in the West tended to mobilize through autonomous, informal groups engaged in spontaneous protest and often viewed the state as the enemy—the embodiment of "patriarchal (sic)" dominance. After the decline of grassroots autonomous movements in many of these countries after the 1970s, movement actors and analysts began to look to the state as a means to overcome social and economic inequality (Chappell 2013).

This process was closely tied to growing interest in studying what were primarily referred to in the literature as women's policy agencies and the idea of state feminism. While these two terms are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between the structures themselves and the process of state feminism in which the women's policy agencies are a central player. The relationship between the two concepts is part of the genesis—of their use by those international researchers who, for the most part, have studied agencies in Western postindustrial countries where the notion of state feminism moved from "a loose notion to an operationalized concept (McBride and Mazur 2007: 501)."

This shift beginning in the 1980s was associated with the proliferation of women's policy agencies themselves. Later in the 1990s, when the Research Network on Gender and the State (RNGS) took on a systematic study of women's policy agencies, the concept of state feminism was sharpened to assess what agencies did: the degree to which GEMs effectively promoted women's interests within the state, through advancing women's movements actors' ideas and claims in policy debates and content—"substantive representation" and helping the actors that forwarded those claims to gain access to state governing arenas "descriptive representation."[2]

The notion of state feminism was first articulated by Scandinavian feminist scholars where women's movements had been less from the grassroots and whose attitudes toward the state were generally positive. In 1987, Helga Hernes first introduced the term in her book *Welfare States and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*. Her view was comprehensive: State feminism included a range of public policies and rules but also "the interplay between agitation from below and integration from above" that would lead to a "woman-friendly polity" (15). Siim (1991) called Hernes's idea "feminism from above," a term that meant not only favorable policies but also the presence of feminist women in government offices. "The expression then referred to both feminists employed as administrators and bureaucrats in positions of power and to women politicians advocating gender equality policies (Ibid., 189)." While most Scandinavian scholars used the term to label some type of interaction between activists outside the state and sympathetic feminists inside the state, a few focused on women's policy agencies (Nielsen 1983), but none offered a definition of feminism. A woman-friendly polity usually meant the smooth relationship for women between their family, working, and public life—but was that really feminist?

Unlike the Scandinavian scholars, Australians had an active tradition of feminist skepticism of the patriarchal state. However, in the late 1980s, Australian researchers observed the growing number and relevance of women's policy agencies in their own country and directed their work to understanding what these offices did for women. This led to new theorizing about feminism and the state (Sawer 1990; Eisenstein 1996). Work of Australian scholars Pringle and Watson (1992) and Franzway

[2] For more on the large-scale RNGS project see McBride and Mazur (2010) and a description of the RNGS dataset (Mazur and McBride 2006). For how RNGS used the concepts of substantive and descriptive representation first introduced in Pitkin's categorization of different types of representation (1967) and then operationalized and measured them in the project see Chapter Two.

et al. (1989) challenged the claim of the monolithic patriarchal state by observing that government, in fact, comprises many different arenas for political and administrative action. This more complex view of states opened the way for many scholars to see them not as enemies but as a means by which feminist activists could challenge the male-dominated way of doing things and be successful. Rather than focus on the complex array of agencies, they found at all levels of government; however, Australian researchers were primarily interested in the individuals—called femocrats—who worked in those agencies and elsewhere and who promoted a feminist agenda through those structures (Sawer 2016). They called this system a femocracy and therefore did not embrace the concept of state feminism in their work.

The French touch in state feminism research

Following the pioneering work by Lévy (1988), a French femocrat, who did her doctoral dissertation on state feminism in France, studies of French state feminism and GEMs took-off in the wake of the power and prestige of Yvette Roudy's Ministry of Women's Rights. The "Roudy Ministry" gave unprecedented visibility to the issue of women's rights policy and politics during the Mitterrand years (1981–1986) through a well-funded national and territorial administration (Jenson and Sineau 1995; Mazur 1995b; Thébaud 2001). As studies conducted in the 1990s and 2000s show, the Roudy ministry was given more resources than any other gender equality machinery established since and some of the highest levels of funding for GEMs in the Western world.

Mazur and Revillard (2020) identify the following three approaches to research on GEMs and state feminism in France. The first approach is qualitative, using archival research and in-depth interviews. This work makes a historical narrative of institutional change, showing how state feminist institutions and policy evolve from one government to the next and identifying different explanatory factors throughout the historical narrative and process tracing. This body of work also includes detailed study of the social trajectories of the relevant actors as well as detailed descriptions of policy tools and modes of operation (Dauphin 2010; Jenson and Sineau 1995; Revillard 2006; Thébaud 2001). Studies have also focused on the use of communication and legal tools in order to initiate social and cultural change, as well as lobbying efforts within the state in order to promote gender equality reforms (Revillard 2006; Thébaud 2001). The study of this intra-governmental activism has contributed the idea of "contentious institutions" lobbying for gender equality from within the state apparatus (Bereni and Revillard 2012).

The second approach is a part of a larger study of women's rights policy in France, which identifies the key role of the women's policy agencies, particularly in the 1980s through the Roudy ministry (Mazur 1995a; McBride Stetson 1987; Jenson and Sineau 1995). McBride's (1987) study of women's rights in France and Mazur's (1995a) analysis of equal employment legislation up to the 1990s, which both showcased French women's policy agencies, actually led them to meet and develop the larger comparative project, RNGS. Both scholars were fascinated by the strength, power, and influence of the Roudy ministry. Their interest resonated

with feminist scholars in other postindustrial countries who had begun to grapple with the notion of a feminist presence within government through WPAs (McBride and Mazur 2007). At the basis of the RNGS network were the questions: Why was the Roudy ministry so powerful? Did such power make a difference? And did other women's policy agencies in Europe and North America have the same resources and impact? French women's policy agencies were covered in the kick-off study for RNGS (Mazur 1995b), *Comparative State Feminism* (McBride and Mazur 1995a, b); the five sectoral studies of RNGS on job training (Mazur 2001), abortion (Robinson 2001), prostitution (Mazur 2004); political representation (Baudino 2005) and the hot issue Mazur (2006) as well as well as the follow-up study to CSF—*Changing State Feminism* (Outshoorn and Kantola 2007).

A third approach is to move to a multi-level approach. While many of the earlier studies of WPAs were on national level offices, recent works have shifted attention to multiple levels, the EU level (Perrier 2006; Jacquot 2013; Sénac et al. 2006), and to the local level, particularly in the context of the Gender Equality Policy in Practice network that focusses on gender equality policy implementation where in France GEMs and the process of state feminism have an important role in adopting and implementing many gender equality policies (Engeli and Mazur 2024). The development of studies of gender policy at the European Union level accompanied the definition and implementation of the policy itself, and more generally favored the development of gender policy studies in Europe, with significant input from French academics. For example, Jacquot (2009, 2010, 2014) analyzes the evolution of gender equality policy at the European level, from equal pay to gender mainstreaming, shedding light on interactions between WPAs at the national and supranational levels, focusing on the different types of tools (legal, budgetary, cognitive) this policy translated into, and analyzing the complex interplay between gender equality policy and market forces.

Common agendas and next steps

The essays in this special issue suggest some interesting avenues for future research. First, there is a critical need to deepen our understanding of GEMs beyond established Western democracies. Cross-national analyses of GEMs could clarify how and why these institutions manifest in different states regions. Do the ingredients that matter for success, as well as those that don't, in OSCE countries, matter for success in sub-Saharan Africa? In Latin America? How do GEMs in rising powers like China, Russia, and India differ from those in less powerful states? The OSCE guide is an exciting first step in thinking comparatively about GEMs beyond established Western democracies, but there is still room for analytical growth, particularly with regard to understanding GEMs in autocracies and illiberal states as well as in regions like Africa, East Asia, and South America.

In addition to expanding our aperture beyond Western democracies, there is a need to incorporate intersectionality into the study of GEMs. Taking a structural approach, or what Myra Marx Ferree calls "interactive intersectionality" (Ferree 2009, 85), to intersectionality with regard to GEMs would be especially fruitful

(Hancock 2007; McCall 2005). A structural approach to intersectionality emphasizes how meanings of gender, race, and class are embedded in and reproduced through contextually located institutions, processes, and systems (Ferree 2009). Approaching GEMs and intersectionality in this way allows for analyses of power and marginalization that are unique to different contexts. Not all institutional mechanisms speak to a heterogenous collection of women's interests. Articulating whose interests—elite, white women? the state?—are being served and whose are being marginalized and on what grounds requires an intersectional lens. Moreover, future research needs to attend to the ways that GEMs intersect with, enhance, or otherwise affect movements for racial justice, indigenous movements, and more. Thus, regardless of the exact approach taken to intersectionality, the need for incorporating it into analyses of state gender equality machinery remains.

Early studies of state feminism tracked how institutional mechanisms for gender equality emerged, especially vis-à-vis the UN World Conferences on Women. In some ways, these original analyses were tinged with hope. Hope that these emergent institutions would elevate and improve the status of women; hope that they might hold states accountable for policies and practices that perpetuated gender inequality. The new millennium, however, has been marked by the rise of anti-democratic forces and a staunch backlash against the hard-won gains of feminists around the world.

The research agenda for GEMs, then, needs to include systematic conceptualizations and measurements of gender justice backlash and democratic reversal, which several of our contributors map out in part. Similar to our call for cross-national analyses of institutional mechanisms for gender equality, cross-national analyses of backlash and democratic reversal (and/or autocratic entrenchment) are critical. For instance, what patterns of backlash do we see in backsliding democracies and how do those patterns compare with backlash in authoritarian states? More pointedly, what actually constitutes backlash with regard to state feminism? Scholars of GEMs in non-democracies have shown how the state can co-opt state feminist institutions for their own agendas (Ayat 2022; Allam 2019). Such analyses would pair well with those on backlash. Empirically distinguishing between co-optation and backlash would deepen our understanding of how states engage with and shape gender equality efforts.

Finally, the agenda before us necessitates multi-level studies and a keen awareness of the extent to which concepts developed in one context travel to another (Sartori 1970). Similar to the shift in French state feminism research mentioned in the previous section, we suggest scholars develop analyses of GEMs that cut-across multiple levels of governance. Analyses might consider, for instance, how the African Union's Women, Gender, and Youth Directorate functions across different member states and what relationship it has to state-level institutions. How do those patterns compare with local gender desks or rural women's organizations? Such analyses will further refine to our understanding of GEMs as critical actors in different contexts. In developing analyses of GEMs that span both the Global North and the Global South, we must stay attuned to the utility and application of key concepts.

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ROUNDTABLE

State feminism, global feminist waves and democratic backsliding: global and cross-national perspectives

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Abstract

This essay explores cross-national patterns in state feminism, or women's policy agencies, in relation to broader trends in autonomous feminist organizing. The role and effectiveness of such agencies in the context of resistance to feminist initiatives, democratic backsliding and backlash against progress towards gender justice are considered. The essay contends that connections and relations of solidarity between autonomous and state feminism, across borders, and across class and identity-groups in a variety of contexts is important for maintaining and/or continuing progress towards gender justice. Some promising new directions for future research are identified.

Keywords Feminism · Democracy · Global

Essay

It is hard to undertake any current feminist project without acknowledging the context of backlash, recidivism and resurgent autocracy that presents the spectre of the "Revenge of the Patriarchs"—as Chenoweth and Marks (2022) put it in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*—. In the USA, a sustained assault on women's reproductive rights has borne fruit, even under a Democratic president and our first ever female and African American Vice-President. The breathtaking advances in LGBTQ rights that characterized the last two decades are now subject to sustained challenge from opponents of "gender" and "woke" politics in general. Indiana, where I lived for 18 years, has now outlawed abortion altogether.[1] And of course, as the *Foreign*

[1] See this NPR story on how Indiana now bans nearly all abortions: Watkins, M. 2023."After Yearlong fight." August 1. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/08/01/1191156197/after-yearlong-fight-a-near-total-abortion-ban-is-going-into-effect-in-indiana.

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Affairs article indicates, it is not just the USA. In Canada, where I work, the terrible attacks at the University of Waterloo echo across the country as hate crimes against African Americans, Jews, Muslims and other racialized and religious minorities surge.[2] Similar concerns present in countries that had been seen as established democracies—such as India—and in regions where democracy was thought to be resurgent—such as Eastern Europe. Democracy is under assault, as are feminism, gender justice and women's rights around the world. This year, democracy declined for the 17th year in a row (Freedom House 2023).[3] This is not a coincidence: Feminism and democracy go hand in hand (Forester et al. 2022).

It is in this context that we come to the questions for this special issue about the role that institutional mechanisms to promote gender equality can play in advancing gender justice—or at least providing a bulwark against such rollbacks of women's rights and democratic backsliding. Global patterns of the diffusion of gender equality machineries suggest much optimism about the role such gender equality mechanisms would play in promoting peace, equality and development through gender justice. These agencies proliferated as a result of transnational feminist activism especially at the intergovernmental meetings at Beijing (McBride and Mazur 2013a, b; True and Mintrom 2001). The rapid pace of change was remarkable compared to other issues: Institutionalization, it was hoped, would provide continuity, resources and reliability in many contexts. State feminism has been an important avenue for advancing women's rights and gender justice, though the conditions under which such mechanisms lead to greater empowerment of women and gender justice vary greatly (McBride and Mazur 2013a, b; OSCE Report). At a global or transnational level, we also see these types of "state feminist" mechanisms operating as part of global governance. For example, UN Women is an instance of one such agency which has unquestionably been important for the development of feminist movements at all levels—international, transnational, national and local (Snyder 2006; Kelly-Thompson et al. 2023).

However, the global forces arrayed against the femocrats and institutional leaders seeking to advance gender equality are daunting. State feminism, regardless of the form of institutional mechanism or other characteristics, is no silver bullet for maintaining or advancing gender equality. The attacks on these institutional mechanisms, and efforts to redirect and undercut them, do attest to their impact. No one would bother dismantling these agencies unless they cared about this impact. There is much to learn from the efforts to defund, undermine, rename and redirect these agencies.

These lessons should be shared with activists in civil society, who are also seeking to advance gender equality on hostile territory. This is a context in which

[2] On hate crimes in Canada see Statistics Canada at https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230322/dq230322a-eng.htm; On the attacks at Waterloo see Sam Levine for the Guardian June 29 2023 at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/29/canada-stabbing-attack-university-waterloo-gender-issues-class: On hate crimes in the USA see the Southern Poverty law Center.

[3] Freedom House. 2023. *Freedom in the World*. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years.

everyday feminist actions—such as hanging a rainbow flag on one's shop—can result in death in the USA (Weber and Vogel 2023). In Russia, feminist punk group Pussy Riot has been violently repressed and whipped by Cossacks for their efforts to draw attention to misogyny in religious institutions (Walker 2014). Even the nationalist women involved in movements for greater democracy in Belarus faced violence seeking to put them in their place (UN News 2020), while Russian women protesting the war in Ukraine have similarly feared violence (Radio Free Europe 2023).

Feminists inside and outside the state are under attack, and to maintain the important advances made over the past four or five decades, feminists must find areas of shared purpose and forge a common front across borders, across racial and ethnic groups, across classes and across gender identities. This is a difficult project, no doubt, but it is one to which we must commit if we seek to overcome the current assault on gender justice. Insider–outsider partnerships, which have always been powerful drivers of gender justice, are more important than ever before. And they must be complemented by international alliances (OSCE report; Mazur 2002; Htun and Weldon 2018). Building alliances, coalitions and partnerships is critical to protecting the gains made on women's rights, and necessary for further progress.

Some feminists have resisted approaches to gender equality that seeks to place gender alongside other inequalities, fearing its dilution or elision (as in the case of some feminists in Portugal) (Alonso et al. 2012, 170)). However, in most contexts, intersectionality has come to be seen as an important principle for contemporary feminists, so resisting an intersectional approach has been less common than efforts to put intersectionality into practice. The question is *how* to institutionalize intersectionality while maintaining a gender focus (Verloo and Walby 2012). How do we institutionalize intersectional solidarity in a way that best frustrates or resists the attacks on "woke" politics, on "gender theory," and on gender and intersectionality itself? This may take a particularly savvy approach, as political strategies that worked in the past may find new opponents. There is an important research agenda about how to build intersectional solidarity across varied institutional contexts (Goetz and Sandler 2007). Building connections across contexts—across national contexts, identity groups and sphere of organizing (i.e. both state and civil society)—may offer a source of resistance to roll backs where progress has been made and additional power resources to advance an intersectional agenda.

The violence and extremism driving the attack on gender justice ought not to be underestimated. Such violence, and autocratic politics more generally, has a chilling effect on feminist organizing and undercuts gains in women's rights. But the global wave that is feminist consciousness will not be easy for our opponents to contain. The feminist genie cannot be put back into the bottle.

State feminism and democracy

What is the relationship between state feminism, autonomous feminism and democracy? A preliminary analysis of a dataset of 70 countries over 4 points in time (1975–2005) suggests a statistically significant, positive relationship at the most general level between the presence of a women's policy machinery and level of democracy. Controlling for autonomous feminist movements only points to the strength of this relationship. Together, autonomous and state feminism are associated with about a third of the variation in democracy level, as measured by the Polity dataset (Table 1).

Other data point to a resurgence of both feminist mobilization and a backlash against feminism and an assault on democracy and multilateralism in general (Forester et al. 2022; Weldon et al. 2023; Sandler and Goetz 2020).

Conclusion and directions for further research

We need to know more about state feminism and how it interacts with autonomous feminism and with the struggle to deepen democracy, reinvigorate civil society and advance social justice. We now have an extensive philosophical and empirical literature on the importance of autonomy (e.g. Marway 2023; Forester et al. 2022; Htun and Weldon 2018; Kelly-Thompson et al. 2024). However, even though research on backlash against feminism and the current anti-gender movement is proliferating (e.g. Ayoub and Page 2020; Ayoub and Stoekl 2024; Roggeband and Kriznan 2020; Zaremberg et al. 2021), we do not know enough about how specifically this affects state feminism, and with what consequences. There is much to learn from the efforts to defund, undermine, rename and redirect state feminist agencies. This means tracing the meaning and impact of name changes, including reconfiguration of existing agencies (e.g. UNWomen) (Sandler and Goetz 2020). Similarly, we need further exploration of the relationship of these various forms of feminist mobilization to each other and to democracy: Can they be bulwarks against roll-backs and democratic backsliding, alone or together with other forms of feminist mobilization? Last, how can feminists build multidimensional, robust relations of solidarity: How do we identify and act in areas of shared interest or concern? More broadly, how can feminists best undertake coalition building across institutional contexts, to build partnerships inside and outside the state, inside and outside multilateral institutions, to regain momentum and repel the assaults on gender justice and democracy? These questions become ever more critical as the assault on feminists and their allies continues apace.

Table 1 Correlation of democracy (Polity) with strong and autonomous FM, WPM

	Coefficient	Probability > |t|	# Observations (*R*-sq)
Women's policy machinery (existence) (bivariate corr)	.26		280
Women's policy machinery (high effectiveness) (bivariate corr)	.29		280
Women's policy machinery (multivariate panel (RE) regression coefficient	4.01	.000	277 ($R = .27$)
Strong and autonomous FM (multivariate panel (RE) regression coefficient	2.29	.000	277 ($R = .27$)
Women's policy machinery (high effectiveness) (Panel)	3.05	.000	277 ($R = .23$)

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ROUNDTABLE

Institutional mechanisms for gender equality as catalysts and critical actors: findings, recommendations and research agenda from the OSCE review

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to present a cross-national study of gender equality mechanisms, *Institutional Mechanisms as Critical Actors for Gender Equality: A Review from the OSCE Region* https://www.osce.org/odihr/556587, conducted for the Organization of Cooperation and Security of Europe and led by Amy G. Mazur in collaboration with Organization of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in the OSCE. The review is based on a survey of national-level IMs in 42 out of 57 "participating states" in the OSCE region and follow-up qualitative research including elite interviews and two site visits. The article discusses first the methodological approach and framework of the study and then turns findings presented in the 2023 report in five areas. It ends with a presentation of the major policy recommendations and the research agenda for studying IMs on such a global level that came out of the project.

Keywords State feminism · Women's policy machineries · Institutional mechanism for gender equality · OSCE

Introduction

The Organization of Security and Cooperation of Europe (OSCE) was created during the Cold War to bring together countries in Europe, the Soviet Union and North America to promote global security and cooperation. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the OSCE has taken a more humanitarian and prodemocratic approach, often working in participating states to promote free and fair elections.

> The OSCE has a comprehensive approach to security that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human aspects. It therefore

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> addresses a wide range of security-related concerns, including arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, human rights, national minorities, democratization, policing strategies, counter-terrorism and economic and environmental activities (https://www.osce.org/whatistheosce).

Today, the OSCE is comprised of 57 participating states across North America, Europe and Asia: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, and Uzbekistan.

Since 1991, the OSCE leadership has taken a keen interest in promoting gender equality through the reinforcement of what it refers to as institutional mechanisms for gender equality. As a key OSCE document presented at the "Moscow Meeting" of the Conference on the Human Dimension in October 1991 states,

> Full and true equality between men and women is a fundamental aspect of a just and democratic society based on the rule of law. [Participating States] recognize that the full development of society and the welfare of all its members require equal opportunity for full and equal participation of men and women.

The UN's Beijing Declaration in 1995 with its specific sections on GEMs has been an important touchstone for OSCE Action Plans and official decisions on gender equality and "women's participation in public life". The Gender Equality Unit in the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE's GEM, has spearheaded over the years hiring a series of experts from academia to conduct research projects in the OSCE region and to write applied guides for policy actors, OSCE members and gender policy advocates. The guides are then used for practical training throughout the OSCE participating state. Most recently, the Guide on Gender Sensitive Parliaments, *Realizing Gender Equality in Parliament: A Guide for Parliaments in the OSCE Region* (https://www.osce.org/odihr/506885), with research led by Sonia Palmieri has been used in trainings organized by ODIHR in national parliaments in the OSCE to conduct gender audits. ODIHR also sponsors a summer school for advocacy training on gender and politics. Thus, this study and guide on IMs is a part of a highly active state feminist process within the OSCE.

In early summer, 2020, I was contacted by ODIHR to submit an application for the research project on IMs in the OSCE and was hired by the end of the summer. I worked in collaboration with Saša Gavrić, Associate Gender Officer of ODIHR and his team, on all stages of the project. Season Hoard helped me to design, administer and analyze the survey and Sydney Smith assisted me in the qualitative phase of the project. The study was conducted in 2021–2022 and the final guide released in November 2023, *Institutional Mechanisms as Critical Actors for Gender Equality: A Review from the OSCE Region* https://www.osce.org/odihr/556587. This article presents the methodological approach and framework of the project as well as the

major findings presented in the guide in five areas. It ends with the policy recommendations and the research agenda for studying IMs on a global level that came out of the project.

The mixed methods study: a focus on the perceptions of IM actors

The design of this study includes two phases: the first quantitative phase in which an online survey was sent to the major national-level machinery in the 56 Participating States of the OSCE (excluding the Holy See) in November 2021 and a second phase in which IMs in 18 of those responding countries were investigated in more detail through in-person interviews conducted from May to August 2022. A total of 42, out of 56, IMs responded to the survey. The complete list of IMs covered in the survey with the year of establishment, location and IM type can be found in the Appendix. The on-line survey, with both closed and open-ended questions, asked the officials in charge of each IM to provide information about the mechanism's structure and authority, administrative capacity, policy tools and consultation, and find out what was considered to be successful action, the ingredients for success as well as concrete examples of policy success in recent years in overall achievement of gender equality goals, the use of gender-mainstreaming tools, advisory council action and civil society consultation. The result was over 400 text answers across the 42 surveys and 183 individual policy success stories. The analysis of these success stories show there is a remarkable imperative of success across all of the 42 countries in at least one of the four areas where success was studied.

In the second qualitative phase, interviews were conducted in the countries where IMs agreed to a follow-up interview in the survey, with officials working for the IMs, gender experts and civil society representatives in 18 of the 42 countries for a total of 65 interviews. The goal of the interviews was to better understand the tools, ingredients and dynamics of the concrete policy successes that had been reported on in the open-ended part of the survey. In 16 countries, zoom interviews were conducted – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Italy, Mongolia, Norway, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine. Two countries were selected, Germany and Slovenia, in which to do site visits where extensive in-person interviews took place over a two-day period.

Section Two maps descriptively the 42 IMs in the study from their survey responses and follow-up interviews. Section Three identifies the IMs critical role in the cross-national imperative of success through a variety of practices in diverse national and institutional settings from the survey and interviews. The definitions of success presented by the respondents are also presented in this section. The complex process of IMs being the equivalent to a catalyst in a chemical chain reaction is identified through three duets of contrasting country cases of success.

Both the survey and the elite interviews are used in Section Four, which presents the varieties of practice, including three innovative practices as well as

the complex recipes for success, which exclude a surprising list of ingredients that do not matter. Section Five proposes tools and strategies for capitalizing and building on these successes to better develop and fine-tune IMs as critical actors for their leaders, the staff that work for them and the governments and other stakeholders who pursue the challenging goals of gender equality to follow both inside and outside of the OSCE.

Findings I: Structure and administrative capacity

The structural snapshot taken begins with the type of IMs in the 42 countries in the study, which span the full range identified in previous studies: Ministries, Administrative Agencies, Commissions/Councils and Institutes. In 32 of the countries, there is a single IM—an agency, a council or a ministry. By far the most common type of IM is the administrative agency found in 30 countries. In 23 of those, the agencies are attached to a specific Ministry, like the Sector for Strategies and Policies for Gender Equality and Social Protection in the Ministry of Social Affairs in Albania, or in the **Prime Minister's Office in Cyprus**, the Commissioner for Gender Equality. In 7 countries, the administrative agencies are attached to a ministerial level IM, like in Malta, the Department of Equal Opportunities in the Ministry for Equality, Research and Innovation or in Ireland the Gender Equality Division in the Ministry for Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. In Sweden, there are two administrative agencies- the Division of Gender Equality in the Ministry of Employment and Gender Equality and the autonomous Agency for Gender Equality.

While Germany has a division of gender equality in the Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens and Youth, in 2021 a new structure was put into place that has not been seen anywhere else in the world- the Foundation for Gender Equality, which seeks to proactively work with civil society. Belgium and Ukraine both have unusual structures as well: in Belgium, the Federal Institute for Equality Between Men and Women, which like the Swedish Agency for Gender Equality is autonomous. In Ukraine the Commissioner for Gender Policy in the Vice Prime Minister's Office, which unlike the Commissioner in Cyprus does not have a separate office.

Budget autonomy, the ability of an IM to control its own finances, is a potential strength, which is the case for 1/3 of the IMs; over half have budgets that are dependent on their parent ministries or the government in general. Many countries, France, Sweden, Portugal and Norway for example, have complex budget models that reflect the combination of mainstreaming and targeted approaches. In many of the less wealthy OSCE countries, portions of national operating budgets as well as project funding come from foreign donors like the EU or the UN, or even private organizations and national governments of wealthier countries. Budgets are notoriously difficult to measure for IMs in general given that often they are dispersed across different offices and in countries where a gender mainstreaming approach operates alongside targeted approaches. Foreign donor contributions are also difficult to track. The Norwegian survey raises the challenges of presenting IM budget information. Over 1/3 of IMs surveyed did not provide

any budget data on the share of national budget and half for distribution across IM activities. In Norway, Ireland, Georgia, Hungary, North Macedonia and the US, the budget could not be specified because funds are dispersed across different government units. In Ireland, for example, the IM survey pointed out that it is impossible to distinguish the budget of the department from the larger ministry in which it is housed. Given the problems with providing accurate figures and also the extreme range of national budget share figures across the country's that did report—from 0.0005 to 78%—a systematic analysis of budgets is not possible. Indeed, IM budgets are like trying to get access to a "secret garden", a concept usually used to describe the insider politics of political parties but quite applicable here as well.

The presence of full-time staff in an IM is arguably a more accurate indicator of financial capacity. Out of the 37 countries that supplied staffing information, only the small countries of San Marino and Lichtenstein are staffed by part-time staff alone and in Albania there are more part-time staff than full-time staff according to the survey responses. As the numbers of full-time staff in the national level IMs show below, there is a wide cross-national range of staff-size (Table 1).

The arsenal of organizational arms that each IM has at its disposal also determines the effectiveness, extent and scope of its action. While **separate administrative divisions** allow for more systematic work across policy sectors, **field offices** at the sub national level may permit the IM to pursue policy implementation and program delivery more effectively. **Advisory councils and coordination** bodies are the essential mechanisms for crucial collaborative work with other departments, civil society and international partners. **Information centers** are key to raising public awareness and potentially changing attitudes about gender equality as well as informing citizens from a range of backgrounds form vulnerable communities of their rights and access to helpful resources. In addition, many IMs have an additional arm, not accounted for in the survey. But just as important administrative **focal points** in each ministry with whom they work.

Table 1 Number of staff in reporting participating states

Sweden	104
Azerbaijan	70
Portugal	68
Germany	67
Italy	62
Belgium	45
Romania	40
Switzerland	30
Norway	23
Czech Republic	10
Georgia	7
Slovenia	7
BiH	6
Ukraine	3

Table 2 The full arsenal of administrative structures in France

Separate Administrative Divisions—Equal Employment, Civil Rights, Violence, Culture, Social Affairs
Territorial Administration at the Regional and Departmental Levels
Network of 25 Gender Equality Focal Points in Each Ministry
Consultative councils on Gender Equality: Equal Employment and Anti Sexual Violence
National Women's Rights and Equality Information Center with a Network of Information Centers at the Regional and Departmental Levels; 125 in all

The French Department of Women's Rights and Equality deploys all five arms in its arsenal as shown in Table 2.

Nine countries in the study have none of these arms, with over half of the remaining countries deploying advisory bodies to propel their action and one third of the IMs in control of separate administrative divisions and information centers. Only a handful of IMs have field offices under their authority.

Findings II: The cross-national imperative of IM success: three contrasting duets

The 183 individual success stories told by the IMs in the survey demonstrate a success imperative across a diverse set of settings. At the same time, as the guide illustrates, there is no one-size-fits-all metric of success or best practice for all of the IMs. Given that it is impossible to examine all 183 success stories in the survey, three contrasting duets of success stories were told in order to show the imperative of IM success across a diversity of settings and how good practices are successfully pursed in each of these different contexts. The three duets cover the economic, regional and cultural diversity of the OSCE and the full range of IM characteristics in the study including, type, remit, staff-size and date of establishment. As Table 3 shows, for each duet, the IMs success story unfolded in the same arena of action: for Slovenia and Germany the implementation of gender equality goals in general; for Ukraine and Belgium, the full range of Gender

Table 3 IM success stories in three contrasting duets of countries

Duet 1: Gender Equality Goals in Action
*Slovenia: Division of Equal Opportunities, 2012
*Germany: Division of Gender Equality, 1986
Duet 2: GM Tools in Action
+Ukraine: Commissioner for Gender Policy, 2017
Belgium: Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, 2002
Duet 3: International Collaboration
+Bosnia and Herzegovina: Agency for Gender Equality, 2017
Sweden: *Gender Equality Division, 1982/ Equality Gender Equality Agency, 2018
KEY: *Located in a Ministerial Level IM, +Located in the Prime Minister's Office

Mainstreaming Tools available; and in Bosnia/ Herzegovina and Sweden in International Collaboration. Thus, the study follows a most different systems comparative design where highly contrasting countries have surprisingly similar outcomes.

Findings III: Chain reactions of gender equality success and empowerment

From these detailed stories of the success imperative of IMs as critical actors with their variety of good practices across quite different contexts, the role of IMs, regardless of type or administrative capacity, in the complex processes of adopting implementing and evaluating gender equality policies is one of a catalyst in a chemical chain reaction. While IMs cannot go it alone, they are able to initiate, coordinate, oversee and advise on policy action that leads to good policy practice that has the potential to improve gender equality in that policy area and in society as a whole and have a more transformative impact to change established gender norms and relations in the population and among decision-makers, implementers, civil servants, law enforcement agents, etc. This chain reaction of success, however, can only happen with willing partners in civil society, government and at the international level; like a chemical reaction the firing of each element then pushes movement forward; the more elements in the chain reaction, the more likely reaction will lead to something meaningful for the practice of gender equality. As Fig. 1 shows, the IM serves as catalyst for the chain reaction and the other elements also must be activated through meaningful international collaboration (IC), civil society consultation (CSC) and government consultation (GC).

If the chain reaction works, actors that were formally excluded will be represented and empowered in the process, both substantively, in policy content, and descriptively, as participants in the process, ultimately in an intersectional manner where all different types of gender interests are represented.

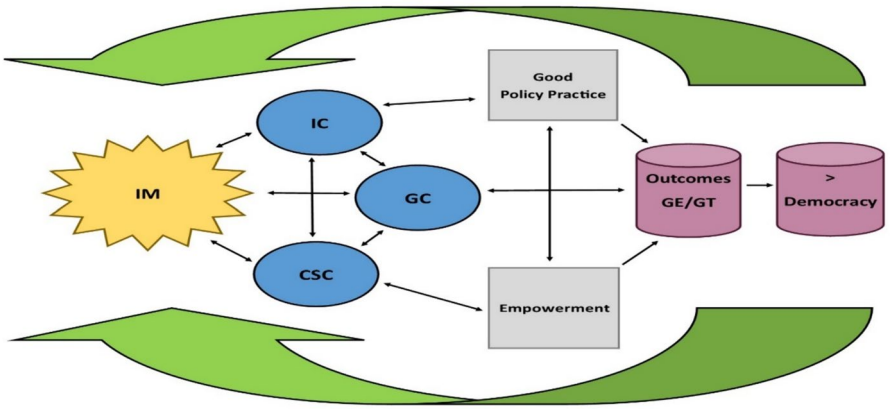

Fig. 1 Chain Reactions of Gender Equality Policy Success, Good Practice and Empowerment

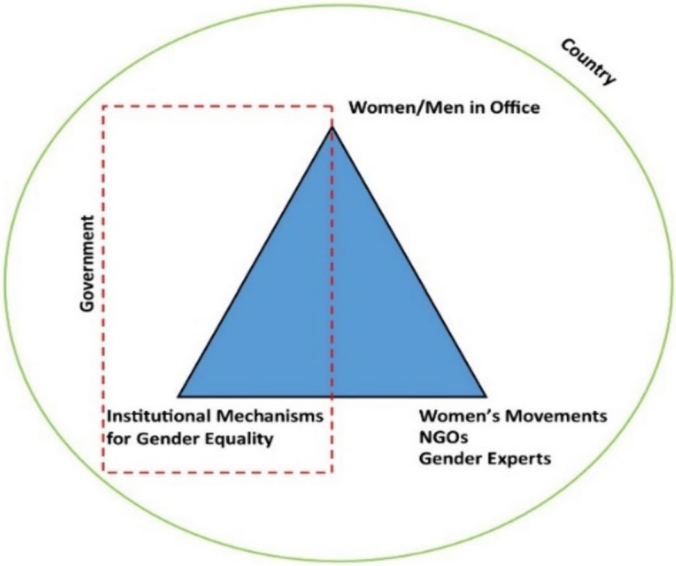

Fig. 2 Triangle of Policy Empowerment

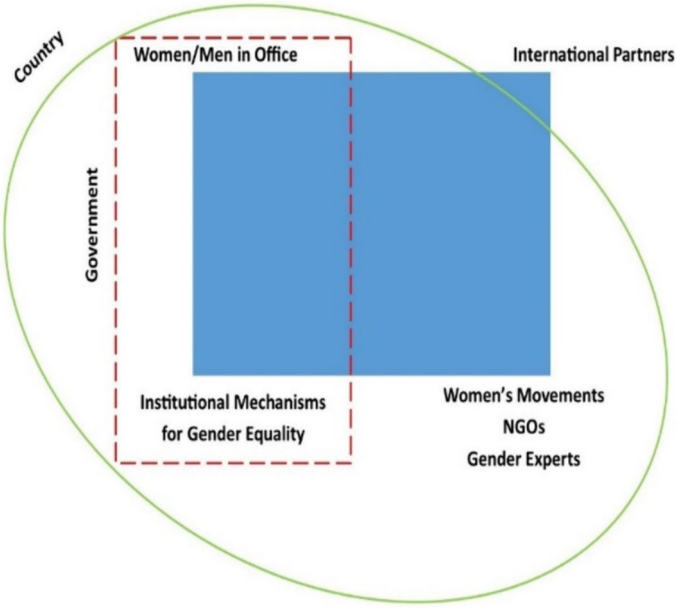

Fig. 3 Rectangle of Policy Empowerment

Through this empowerment and the "rectangle of policy empowerment" rather than the conventional "triangle of empowerment" (Figs. 2 and 3) between IMs at the national level, civil society organizations, members of government

and parliament, both men and women, and international IMs, policy may be authoritatively put into practice to generate gender equality and enhance democratic performance.

Findings IV: Toward recipes for IM success: shifting combinations of ingredients and core constants

While the survey results show the combination of ingredients that lead to success shifts across countries and across arenas of IM action, when looking at both qualitative and quantitative findings there are four core constants that produce different levels of success through the chain reaction process.

- Core Constant 1: The approach and leadership of the IM is fundamental to their roles as catalysts and critical actors.
- Core Constant 2: International frameworks and guidelines provide a road map for IMs and other stakeholder to follow in the codification of those goals in their own countries.
- Core Constant 3: Even in the face of challenging times, many countries have made great strides integrating GM and the tools of mainstreaming into the work of their governments and administration.
- Core Constant 4: More than the vague notion of political will, this study shows that it is of utmost importance that high level decision-makers be sensitive to gender equality and engaged with its complexity AND that political leaders place the achievement of gender equality high on their decision-making agendas.

Ingredients that do not matter

The three duets as well as the survey responses from the IMs clearly show that cultural, economic, political or social context have little effect on the record of success and empowerment. The political color of the party in power did not matter in successful results either. Success occurred under governing majorities of the right and the left; although in some countries, like Germany and Slovenia, the arrival of gender-friendly left-wing government helped the IMs cause. In Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political ideology of the parties in power matter less, given they were catch-all nationalist parties, than whether they were gender sensitive and made gender equality a top political priority.

Finally, with regards to the features of IMs, there is no specific attribute that favors success over others. As the duets show, successful action occurs across countries with different types of IMs, different levels of staff, different remits, at different positions in the hierarchy both IMs and that were under the direct authority of a ministry and those that were more independent and autonomous. Indeed, when IMs have a close relationship to their minister or to the cabinet and chief executive, they seem to be able to more effectively persuade government gatekeepers to provide the crucial support than agencies that are further

away from the centers of power. What seemed to matter most was the permanence of the staff and the agency head across government changes. The survey responses also clearly echoed the findings of the duets, that the position of the IM in the government hierarchy, budget and staff size are not identified as important ingredients.

Findings V: Varieties of innovative practice

The last section of the guide ends on an optimistic, positive and practical note by zooming-in on innovative tools developed and put into action by IMs in three countries.

- Getting Business on Board: The Gender Equality Certification Program in Italy
- Switching Roles: Researchers Look to the IM for Team Members in Portugal
- It's All in the App: The Swiss IM Designs and Open-Source Equal Pay Survey Tool

In addition to providing examples of good practice from which other IMs may draw ideas and adapt to their own settings, all of the innovations counter the conventional wisdom that IMs are out of touch with current developments due to their highly bureaucratic nature. Taken together, these good practices show whether gender equality and empowerment chain reactions are in full force or not, does not affect individual IM's ability to put into action highly useful and innovative tools.

Conclusions: recommendations for IMs in action and for research on IMs in a global context

The following Table presents the recommendations and concrete advice for helping IMs came out of the study (Table 4).

Figure 4 shows how IMs can pursue success through the policy cycle.

The mixed methods study and findings suggest the following research agenda. First and foremost, there is a clear need to go beyond western postindustrial democracies. In this study, the inclusion of emerging democracies in Central Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union allows for a much more nuanced picture of IM structure, capacity and success. At the same time, it shows that success comes in different shapes and sizes and that emerging democratic countries with fewer resources can achieve certain levels of success as much as countries with stable democracies and plenty of resources. Not only do IMs need to be mapped out across the globe, but the chain reaction of success should be traced at all levels—international, national and sub-national.

The study shows that conventional ingredients for success are not necessarily the most important ones: powerful IMs, IMs with large budgets, the vague concept of "political will", the presence of left-wing governments as well as stable

Table 4 Helping IMs be effective catalysts and critical actors

Type, Establishment and Mandate
Establish IMs through statute legislation linked to regularly updated gender equality policy and legal frameworks
Have a Single IM that oversees and coordinates all government action
Give IMs direct access to ministerial and chief executive leadership
If based in a ministry, parent ministries should include gender equality in the title
Leadership and Administrative Capacity
Select the most experienced woman or man for the job
Assure that all IM staff have civil servant status
Give IMs a full arsenal of administrative arms at national and sub-national levels of government and the resources to administer them
Focal points should be established in all ministries and be fully funded
Policy-making Capacity: Tasks and Approach
Give IMs the authority to coordinate policy at all stages—pre-adoption, adoption post-adoption
Equip IMs to take a dual approach that combines focusing on specific core areas of policy and gender mainstreaming
Government Consultation
Promote gender-sensitivity with all government decision-makers
Make gender equality a top government priority
Ensure IMs regular and direct access to decision-makers
Put into place capacity building and awareness raising programs for upper-level civil servants and political leadership, including ministers
Civil Society Consultation
Consult CSO's in a formalized way and give them open access to the IM
Work also with NGOs that might have very critical views
Include CSOs representing underrepresented groups
Identify shared goals
International Collaboration
Pursue all six areas of international activity (Tool 4) to assure national compliance with relevant international conventions and treaties
Don't act only as a recipient of international support, but make gender equality also a foreign policy goal
Nurture meaningful partnerships with international actors
Include a full range of CSO representatives

democracy, high levels of economic wealth and development and specific cultural settings. Given the global imperative of success, researchers need to develop studies that test these hypotheses in different settings and regions of the world rather than being so tied to searching for more conventional ingredients for success. Most of all, this project showed that IM success needs to be assessed within the given country's context and timeline with international indicators but not in comparison to other country's rankings. In the final analysis, researchers need to be open to the achievement of success within the context and parameters of a given setting and country and not apply a one size fits all metric for IM activities.

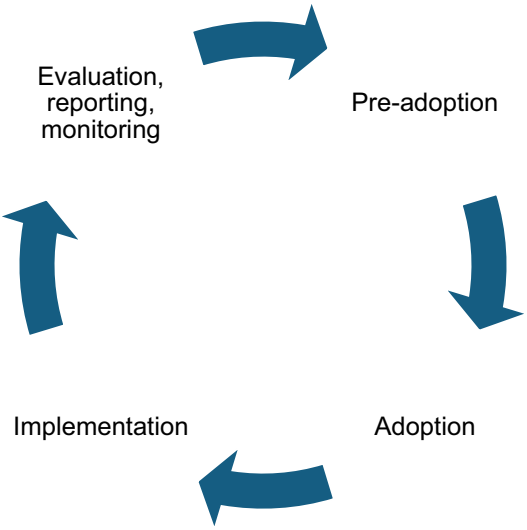

Fig. 4 How to achieve cycles of success in policy practice. Pre-adoption: *Consult* the widest range of government and CSO stakeholders, including gender experts. *Watch* that policies follow framework documents on gender equality. *Assess* gender impacts with gender impact assessment tools. *Sensitize* decision makers to gender equality issues in general and the specific proposals through training programs and outreach. Formal Policy Adoption: *Legislate* formal policies to have parliament's backing. *Collaborate* with gender-friendly allies in parliament, both individuals and committees. *Assure* that final policy content has authority and enforcement power. Implementation: *Design* practical and authoritative tools to carry out the essence of the formal policy. *Consult* all stakeholders about the best way to implement and to get buy-in. *Oversee* and *Coordinate* all administrative levels. *Train* administrative actors through formal programs on how to implement complex and norm challenging principles of gender equality. Evaluation, Reporting and Mentoring. *Establish* systems of monitoring and reporting for all target groups. *Set* benchmarks and goals to measure impact. *Use* performance indicators, including official international and national indicators, to assess and measure impact and progress. *Consult* experts both national and international

Through this more open-ended approach, the critical role of IMs ultimately can be more objectively and scientifically studied.

Appendix: List of IMs in the survey

Agencies Attached to a Ministry or Prime Minister/Presidents Office.

Albania: Sector for Strategies and Policies for Gender Equality and Social Protection, 2008*
Andorra: Equality Policies Department, 2016*
Bosnia and Herzegovina: Agency for Gender Equality, 2004*
Bulgaria: Directorate of Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discrimination and Social Assistance, 2004*
Croatia: Office for Gender Equality Government of Croatia, 2004*

Cyprus: Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality, 2014 +
Czech Republic: Government Department of Gender Equality, 1998 +
Denmark: Department of Gender Equality, 2000*
Finland: Gender Equality Unit, 2001*
Greece: General Secretariat for Demography, Family Policy and Gender Equality, 1985*
Hungary: Department of Adoption and Women's Policy, 2014 +
Iceland: Directorate of Equality, 2000 +
Latvia: Coordination of Equal Opportunities and Rights for Women and Men*, 2002
Lichtenstein: Equal Opportunities Unit, 2016*
Lithuania: Equal Opportunities, Equality Between Women and Men Unit, 1998*
Moldova: Gender Equality Department, 2007*
Montenegro: Division for Gender Equality of Montenegro, 2007*
North Macedonia: Department for Gender Equality, 2007 *
Norway: The Department for Equality, Non-Discrimination and International Affairs, 1977*
Romania: National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men, 2016*
Serbia: Coordination Body for Gender Equality, 2014 +
Switzerland: Federal Office for Gender Equality, 1988*
Turkey: General Directorate on the Status of Women, 1990*

Commissions Attached to a Ministry or Chief Executive Office.

Kazakhstan: Commission for Women, Family and Demographic Policy, 1998 +
Mongolia: Committee on Gender Equality, 1995 +
Russia: Coordinating Council for the National Action Plan on Women's Interests, 2017* USA: Gender Policy Council, 2020 +
Azerbaijan: The State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs, 2006 +
Armenia: Council for Women's Affairs/ Equal Opportunities Department, 2019*
Georgia: Interagency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2017 +
Portugal: Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, 1977*

Agencies Attached to a Parent IM Ministry.

France: Ministry Delegate for Gender Equality, Diversity and Equal Opportunities and Women's Rights and Gender Equality Department, 1985
Germany: Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens and Youth and Division for Gender Equality, 1986/Federal Foundation for Gender Equality, 2021
Italy: Minister for Family and Equal Opportunities (2020)/ Department of Equal Opportunities, 2000*

Malta: Ministry for Equality, Research and Innovation, Human Rights Directorate- Gender Unit*, 2015.

Slovenia: Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities/ Division of Equal Opportunities, 2012*
Sweden: Minister of Employment and Gender Equality (2020); Division of Gender Equality (1982)*/Gender Equality Agency (2018)
Ireland: Ministry for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Gender Equality Division, 2000

Ministerial Level Offices.

San Marino: State Secretariat for Health and Social Security and Social Affairs, Political Affairs, Equal Opportunities and Technological Innovation, 2008
Luxembourg: Ministry of Equality between Men and Women and General Coordination, Equality Policies, 1995

Other.

Belgium: State Secretary for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities and Diversity 2020/ Federal Institute for the Equality Between Men and Women, 2002 (autonomous)
Ukraine: Commissioner for Gender Policy, 2017 +

Key: * = Attached to a Ministry; + Attached to the Prime Minister's or President's Office. Year indicates when IM was established.

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ROUNDTABLE

State gender ideology and national women's machinery: a necessary shift in focus

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Abstract

Advocates of women's rights in many Muslim countries have long demanded the formation of state-level institutional structures that promote and protect women's rights, in turn contributing to democratization and development. The design and impact of such structures, collectively referred to as national women's machineries (NWMs), has, however, varied across contexts. This paper advocates analysis of the actors and factors that impact the design, influence, and function of NWMs, with an emphasis on the role of state gender ideology. It argues that NWMs, as formal state institutions, are never conceptualized and formed in a vacuum, with various competing interests impacting their design and function especially in non-democratic and unrepresentative contexts. Through a case study of NWMs in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it shows that despite efforts for cabinet-level women's rights policy-making since the early 1990s, throughout the past decades such gains have faced backlash and reversal as a result of conservative ideological shifts, at times rendering such institutions illegitimate in the eyes of the Iranian feminist movement.

Keywords National women's machineries (NWMs) · Gender ideology · Feminist movements · State institutions · Iran

Feminist activists have long demanded state-level institutional structures that promote and protect women's rights, in turn contributing to democratization and development. This demand was further supported from transnational and international feminist communities when the Beijing Platform for Action from the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women emphasized the "creation and strengthening of national machineries for the advancement of women at the highest possible level of government" (United Nations 1995). Similar to their counterparts in other regions, women's rights activists in many Muslim countries have also organized in demand of such structures, collectively referred to as national women's

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machineries (NWMs);[1] however, their design and impact has varied across contexts. While some have formed clearly mandated structures for mainstreaming gender concerns in all state institutions, laws, and programs, others have been less influential, often formed to merely appeal to donors or to serve political male elites' interests. Such entities have also varied across time, subjects to shifts of the ruling elites' ideological tendencies, further highlighting the fact that state ideology often plays itself out on women's bodies and rights (Abdmolaei 2019; Hoodfar 1992; Joseph 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997). In the recent democratic backslidings, women's state machineries that sought to challenge the status quo have also come under frequent attack of extremist forces, resulting in major shifts in their operations or even their dissolution, such as the Taliban's closure of the Ministry for Women's Affairs in Afghanistan in 2021.[2] Such backlash impacts various aspects of women's rights and status beyond mere policy-making, including limiting women's opportunities in employment, education, or public life in general.

To help explain the large level of varieties across NWMs, feminist scholars are increasingly utilizing an institutionalist framework that critically analyzes the actors and factors that impact the function and objectives of state-level institutional structures from a gendered lens. The institutional turn in feminist political science of the recent decades emphasizes an examination of how gender norms operate within institutions and how institutional processes construct and maintain gender power dynamics (Chappell 2002; Htun and Laurel Weldon 2018; Guido et al. 2023; Krook and Mackay 2011; Manjoo and DeRemer 2008; Waylen 2007). Challenging the assumption that state institutions are gender neutral, feminist institutionalism as a framework offers insight onto how formal political institutions, particularly in non-democracies, are designed to curtail women's rights, limiting possibilities for progress or feminist activism. To date, many scholars of the Middle East, including those interested in democratic transitions (Amer 2020; Arjomand 2008; Kamrava 2023), have, however, rarely analyzed institutions from a gendered lens or how gendered power relations are reproduced in seemingly gender-neutral structures. This limited attention has resulted in blind spots about key building blocks of liberalism and democratization which according to Fukuyama (2020) include legal codes, constitutions, and policy-making bodies/machineries in addition key institutions such as elections, political parties, and legislatures. Feminist institutionalist approaches are thus uncovering the extent that insincere and inadequate institutionalization of women's rights contributes to authoritarianism, inequality, and injustice, while

[1] Research on government-level policy-making bodies that address women's rights concerns refer to them in various ways, such as women's policy agencies (WPAs) or gender equality machineries (GEMs) (McBride and Mazur 2010; Mazur and McBride 2023; Paxton and Hughes 2017; Weldon 2002). In this paper, I utilize national women's machineries (NMWs), to emphasize their government-level (often within the executive branch) structure that center women's concerns, as opposed to gender equality. The NWMs that I have investigated take the form of women's ministries, vice-presidencies, or women's commissions.

[2] I have argued elsewhere that women's rights institutions that have been suspended are nonetheless worth an analysis since their mere formation and function prior to their dissolution has had impact on local discussions on women's rights and status, as has been apparent from the legacy of Afghanistan's parliamentary gender quotas following the 2021Taliban takeover (Tajali 2023a).

shedding light onto effective structural designs and procedures that can substantively empower women and bring about gender equality.

This brief paper advocates for the intentional consideration of the actors and factors that impact the design, influence, and function of national women's machineries, with an emphasis on the role of state gender ideology. It argues that NWMs, as formal state institutions, are never conceptualized and formed in a vacuum, and despite the local and global push for national-level bodies that are to address women's rights, other competing interests impact their design and function, especially in non-democratic and unrepresentative contexts. At the same time, however, the mere formation of such bodies, often within the executive branch as women's ministries, vice-presidencies, or commissions, provides a space for the articulation of women's rights concerns at the national level. In this regard, building on literature that emphasizes the synthesis of *human agency* and *structure* in democratization and development, NWMs can be formed as structures that both enable or limit human agency, including feminist ideals and activism (Huntington 1991; Mahoney and Snyder 1999). Indeed, despite functioning from within closed authoritarian structures, at times NWMs, thanks to extensive women's rights organizing and agency both from within and outside of the state, have been impactful in promoting notable women-friendly policy changes, while some of such gains have at times faced backlash and reversal, particularly as a result of conservative ideological shifts. Thus, the series of opportunities and constraints that impact the relation between autonomous feminist activism and authoritarian structures in Muslim contexts deserve our attention.

Gender ideology and national women's machineries (NWMs): a brief case study of Iran

There has been a historical debate among feminist scholars and activists on whether women's rights concerns should be pursued from within or outside of state structures. Critics of formal institutionalization of women's rights fear potential cooptation or rejection of women's rights by insincere and male-dominated structures (Guido et al. 2023). On the other hand, many argue that "feminist activists cannot avoid that state" (Chappell 2002, 3), as addressing women's rights concerns requires coordination, consolidation, development, and implementation of relevant policies at various levels of the state, as well as access to resources (Mazur and McBride 2023; Paxton and Hughes 2017). Central to this debate is the motivations of ruling elites vis-à-vis feminist advocates in a given context, driven largely by ideological tendencies that dictate political, social, and economic interests. Indeed a clash between effective feminist mobilization and right-wing populism that is often cloaked in religious extremism has become particularly evident since the 1990s, as ideas of gender equality—or even gender as a social construct—are seen detrimental to traditional family values and the assumed complementarity of genders (Sawer et al. 2023). However, a country's gender ideology is never static, as it is subject to shifts thanks to pressures from grassroots women's rights groups as well as hardliners and some elites who fear changes to the status quo as a result of feminist mobilization.

Conservative gender ideologies that emphasize complementarity rather than equality between genders, and foreground women's domestic duties within the family, contribute to weak institutionalization of women's rights (Tajali 2023c). Often through reference to conservative religious interpretations, such gender unequal ideology results in institutions, policies, and legal frameworks that effectively curtail women's rights, limiting their opportunities and status, especially within the public sphere. An important instance of the proximity between dominant state ideology and institutionalization of women's rights is found in Iran, principally under its state-sanctioned Islamism since 1979. As part of its top-down Islamization efforts, the Iranian clerical establishment adopted various gender discriminatory policies such as restricting women's rights to divorce and child custody, or requiring husband's permission for women's rights to employment, receiving a passport, travel, and more. The limited formal women's institutions formed by the Islamic state soon after its foundation entailed religious women's organizations and political parties that trained and produced religiously devout women who are sympathetic to the theocratic regime, such as the Zeinab Society or the Association of the Women of the Islamic Republic (Tajali 2022; Vakil 2011).[3]

Autonomous women's rights activists, consisting of women across the ideological spectrum ranging from secular to religious, however, continued their agitation of the state to address discriminatory laws against women. Women's continued pressures and the realization that they must also work from within the state to bring about important improvements for women, resulted in certain openings at the national level to create more responsive institutions to women's rights. The election of pragmatic president Akbar Rafsanjani presented the first cabinet-level channel on women's rights when he appointed Shahla Habibi as his Presidential Advisor on Women's Affairs in the early 1990s in the Bureau of Women's Affairs. The 1997 election of reformist President Khatami, in large part thanks to Iranian women's mobilization and voter-recruitment efforts (Mir-Hosseini 2002; Osanloo 2009), created even more opportunities for the institutionalization of women's rights, this time with input from the Iranian women's rights movement. The openings of the reform era (1997–2005) led to the creation of at least two important national-level institutions to advance women's rights. In the executive branch, Khatami upgraded the Bureau of Women's Affairs to become the Center for Women's Participation, a national women's machinery under the leadership of reformist women's rights advocate, Zahra Shojaee. Emphasizing women's public participation, Shojaee's office worked collaboratively with Iran's reformist elites to increase women's access to formal politics and to diverse fields of employment and education (Personal interview with Zahra Shojaee, July 2011). Recognizing limited levels of formal institutionalization of women's rights in Iran, Shojaee also encouraged the formation of women's

[3] The Zeinab Society was founded in 1986 by Maryam Behrouzi as a women's political party with links to the conservative faction in Iran. Behrouzi, a revolutionary woman and female parliamentarian in post-revolutionary Iran's first rounds of parliament, emphasized women's greater access to religious and political authority in Iran but within the prism of the Islamic Republic (Tajali 2015, 2022). Similarly, the Association of the Women of the Islamic Republic was created by elite Islamic women who were interested in fostering the next generation of revolutionary women in Iran.

NGOs to help fill the gaps. According to Ziba Mir-Hosseini, the number of registered women's NGOs rose from 67 in 1997 to 480 in 2005, many of which focused on women's rights and empowerment (2006). In the legislative branch, reformist women parliamentarians of Iran's sixth post-revolutionary parliament (2000–2004) created the women's parliamentary caucus that proactively advocated women's substantive representation (Moghadam and Haghighatjoo 2016; Tajali 2023b). For instance, the women's caucus of the sixth parliament proposed Iran to sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a proposal that was eventually approved by the Iranian parliament at that time, but failed to pass by the Council of Guardians, a body that acts as Iran's upper legislative house.

The 2005 election of conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, however, put an abrupt end to the reformist ideological shifts of the late 1990s and early 2000s that expanded institutionalization of women's rights. A key instance of such reversal was the Ahmadinejad government's insistence on addressing women's rights largely within the context of the family, blaming Iranian feminist activism for undermining traditional values that have led to high rates of divorce and other trends that threaten the family as a basic unit of society. Upon coming to power in 2005, Ahmadinejad's government closed many influential women's NGOs that had been formed during the previous administration. In a highly controversial move and in an effort to emphasize the family, Ahmadinejad renamed the Center for Women's Participation to the Office for Women and Family Affairs in his cabinet, while his appointed head of the office lacked any linkages to the Iranian women's rights movement. The intentional weakening of such institutions in line with the government's conservative gender ideology is viewed by many as backlash against the politicized and mobilized Iranian women's movement that had effectively fostered nation-wide conversations on various aspects of women's rights and gender equality (Hoodfar and Sadr 2009; Mir-Hosseini 2006).

The conservative backlash against feminist mobilization has continued in Iran, greatly impacting the level of women-friendly policy change and substantive representation. Within the past decades, the hardliners have been utilizing the state's undemocratic structures to intentionally marginalize outspoken actors, or those who wish to challenge the status quo, particularly as related to women's rights (Tajali 2023b). Despite the women's rights movements' extensive efforts to increase women's political representation, the theocratic state has been effective in silencing women critical actors, including the occasional feminist insiders.

Ideological hardliners against feminist insiders

According to Mazur and McBride (2023) feminist insiders matter since they have the potential to advocate explicitly feminist agendas in women's policy agencies, in turn enhancing gender equality and the overall quality and performance of democracy. Other scholars have similarly argued that critical actors or those who act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change deserve our attention, including when women's overall numbers in political decision-making is

low (Childs and Krook 2009; Tajali 2023b). As I have argued elsewhere, women critical actors also have the potential to emphasize and work toward feminist agendas in policy-making even in authoritarian contexts, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, despite Iran's authoritarian structures and conservative gender ideology, women who are sympathetic to women's rights have on occasion reached high-level decision-making roles, including in national women's machineries (Tajali 2023b).[4] However, such women's occasional rise to office is often short-lived given the undemocratic institutional structures that fail to safeguard diversity and inclusion in policy-making.

In 2013, the Iranian women's rights movement welcomed the candidacy of Hassan Rouhani for the presidency as his campaign slogans of hope and moderation had the potential to enable effective institutionalization of women's rights and women's substantive representation. Thanks to women's mobilization, Rouhani won the presidency with a landslide, and as a sign of gratitude to women's votes, his office consulted the key members of the Iranian women's rights movement on who should serve as his Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs. My interviews revealed that many of those consulted on this appointment, among them secular feminists, rallied behind Shahindokht Molaverdi, a long-term women's rights advocate who had served in the Center of Women's Participation during the reform era with Zahra Shojaee (Tajali 2022). During her term (2013–2017), Molaverdi acted as a feminist insider (Mazur and McBride 2023), maintaining her close contact with autonomous women's rights groups, as well as pressuring for substantive change from within the government, despite her merely advisory role as a Vice-President. Shortly before the end of her term, however, Molaverdi was forced to resign from her post as a result of her outspokenness against the discriminatory actions of the regime, particularly regarding women and ethnic minorities.[5] The moderate Rouhani government, despite having appointed Molaverdi, seemed powerless against the hardliners who had waged a ruthless "war against women," as anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini described it (2016).[6]

The hardliners' little tolerance of women's rights policy-making and substantive representation has continued throughout the next Iranian administration, Ebrahim

[4] My research on women's substantive representation during Hassan Rouhani's presidency revealed three interrelated factors that facilitated the nomination and election of women critical actors in Iran's formal political structure. They included electoral support and grassroots mobilization around women's rights, willingness of elites to adopt measures toward greater inclusion of women in politics, and occasional openings in Iran's fragmented political context (Tajali 2023b).

[5] Hardliner attack and harassment of Molaverdi intensified when she publicly condemned mass executions in the Sistan Baluchistan province, one of the most deprived and politically marginalized regions in Iran, leaving many female headed households with no support (Mehrabi 2020).

[6] Iranian factional politics has been dominated by conservatives and reformists, marking notable ideological shifts between the two groups in major popular elections, such as the presidency or the parliament as witnessed in recent decades. However, ultimate power in Iran's theocratic structure lies with its unelected institutions, such as the office of the Supreme Leader, the paramilitary groups, and the Council of Guardians, all of which have been dominated by conservatives. In recent years, the hardliner sections of the conservative faction have been successful in monopolizing power in their hands, including over the elected institutions, marginalizing any voices of dissent, including of the reformists (Keshavarzian 2005; Tajali 2022).

Raisi, who since his election in 2021 has re-emphasized a conservative gender ideology. While the Office of Women and Family Affairs remains a cabinet-level post and currently Iran's only NWMs, his appointed Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs, Ensieh Khazali, is an academic with little experience or exposure to Iranian feminist activism. To the disappointment of many Iranian activists, this office remained silent during the women-led protests that erupted in September 2022 with the slogan "woman, life, freedom," following the death in custody of Mahsa Jhina Amini, a Kurdish-Iranian woman who was arrested and beaten by the morality police for allegedly violating Iran's conservative hijab laws (Tajali 2023d). Toeing the conservative line, Khazali also refused to condemn the violent state crackdown on peaceful protestors, many of them young Iranians, increasing the gap between the public and her office.

Despite Iranian feminists' loss of faith in effective institutionalization of women's rights, the mere existence of the Office for Women and Family Affairs nonetheless provides a channel for the articulation for some of women's demands at the national level. For instance, in mid-2023 a number of women rights activists who run independent women's shelters reported to me that the Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs has been receptive to their demands for increased state-provided support and access to resources, including financial support. They shared that violence against women and girls, including honor killings, has notably increased in the aftermath of the "woman, life, freedom," uprisings as many women and girls are emboldened by the protests to resist oppression and discrimination, including in their households. This surge, particularly across Iran's remote provinces, has exhausted the limited resources of women's shelters, all of which operate privately, but are licensed by the Iranian Ministry of Health. When I inquired what explained this support from Vice-President Khazali herself, one activist shared, "it is also in the state's interest to curtail domestic violence, as such violence negatively impacts communities and families" (Personal interview, May 2023). However, this office, alongside with other state institutions, have been less receptive to many other feminist demands, including the decades-long demand for voluntary hijab.[7]

Conclusion

Given the proximity between a state's declared gender ideology and its institutionalization efforts, feminist scholars are increasingly utilizing a feminist institutionalist framework to critically examine the impact of dominant state gender ideology on the design and function of national women's machineries (NWMs). As an approach, feminist institutionalism highlights the gendered nature of existing hierarchies, power relations, norms and rules, and expectations that shape formal (and informal) institutions, particularly in non-democratic contexts that seek to maintain power in

[7] Recognizing the hardliners' firm hold on this issue, Vice-President Khazali has thus far refused to take a clear stand on the hijab and has only echoed the Supreme Leader's position that this issue "requires a combined response: when necessary, forceful subjugation, while other times, forgiveness" (Fararu 2023).

the hands of a select few (Guido et al. 2023). The religious political movement that came to power in Iran in 1979 advocated a conservative gender ideology, or one that rendered women primarily to the domestic sphere, limiting their rights and opportunities in the public sphere. However, the Iranian women's rights movement has been protesting such systemic discrimination, while their organizing for substitutive representation has at times pushed for progressive shifts in the seemingly rigid state-mandated gender ideology. Indeed, despite Iran's authoritarian structure, women's pressures and some responsive elites have on occasion contributed to the formation of notable NWMs. Feminist insiders, or those who maintained close linkages with the autonomous women's rights movement and pushed for important policy changes on women's rights, have even led such institutions. Backlash against feminist activism in Iran in recent years has directly targeted such progress. Emphasizing a conservative stance on gender, hardliner elites are relying on undemocratic features of the state to effectively weaken key institutions on women's rights and appoint token women to lead them, all while feminist resistance persists. The experience of feminist institutionalization in a context such as Iran highlights the significance of NWMs that are designed to be inclusive, intersectional, democratic, and have a clear linkage to the grassroots women's rights movement.

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ROUNDTABLE

Gender equality machineries: the quest for enhanced gender data

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Abstract

This piece underscores the necessity of "enhanced" gender-centric data—official, intersectional data with new batteries of questions, based on situational knowledge, and disaggregated at the city level. Those data are crucial for gender equality machineries (GEM) in their pursuit of gender equity, particularly in societies with a colonial past of enslavement. However, issues of state capacity, GEM's overstretching, and elected officials' political will may pose significant challenges to the production of enhanced gender data. Furthermore, in some polities, unofficial data might be more credible. While the dissemination of anonymized data that comply with existing privacy laws might trigger the formation and action of counter-groups, enhanced gender data enable GEMs to devise evidence-based public policies and equity-seeking gender groups to press for the implementation of those policy initiatives.

Keywords GEM · Gender · Data · Women · Public policy · Intersectional

Introduction

Students of gender equality machineries (or GEMs) have understandably devoted substantial attention to these agencies' involvement with specific policy issues, which ideally should match and stem from women's movement actors' preferences and demands (McBride and Mazur 2010: 18). As a result, the focus has been on the analysis of GEMs role in designing, approving, implementing, and monitoring policies to enhance the participation of women in all spheres of political power (Lovenduski 2005), to legalize access to free, safe, and public abortion services (Ousthoorn, 2003), to guarantee equal pay for equal work in workplaces (Mazur 1995), and so on. Yet, GEMs' work on undoing gender data gaps remains crucial to advancing gender equity.

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This article makes the case that securing the availability of enhanced gender data remains a goal in itself for GEMs, as they empower the struggle for policies and their effective implementation. Enhanced information is official data disaggregated at the city or municipal level, includes themes heretofore neglected by demographic inquiry, and allows for an intersectional analysis of gendered social phenomena. In a globalized world with a highly mobile workforce, the latter is of utmost importance, particularly for postcolonial societies with a past of enslavement. The following sections discuss the centrality of this quest for enhanced gender data, the main features of the latter, and the advantages and perils for both gender equality machineries and gender-based movement actors.

Gendering official statistics

The absence of official data magnifies the social invisibility of gendered dynamics. Lahiri-Dutt (2007), for instance, showed that the paucity of data on women's role in the extractivist sector in India evinces the unfounded public and state perception that they have no labor participation in that industry. Similarly, in the not-so-distant past, census bureaus failed to collect data on women's non-remunerated work in the household (Armstrong and Armstrong 1983)—in what reeked of naturalizing that activity, unproblematizing its ramifications for gender relations, and underplaying its importance for a country's economic and social reproduction. Contemporarily, some countries still do not produce an official tally of same-sex families, accentuating their invisibility, which takes a toll on their capacity to advocate for rights, dedicated public services, and policies. Relatedly, few nations presently have dedicated time and effort to officially count and publicize data on femicide, rendering difficult, otherwise rich, and very revealing cross-country comparisons or intra-country longitudinal analyses. Thus, official data collection is far from gender-neutral: It remains a battleground in the quest for equity in gender matters.

Unquestionably, datum is power. For example, analyzing the case of the USA, a scholar showed that, to be able to fight cases of discrimination against women in hiring and promotion, organized women inside the state began "collecting statistics to document the problems with sex discrimination within the institution" (Banaszak 2010: 109). Official data, or information that a professionalized state bureaucracy collects, processes, and disseminates, are even more powerful. They create a more robust ground for group-based demand-making and for GEMs to draw evidence-based action plans. What kinds of data fulfill that role? Evidence-based claims-making and public policymaking (Sanderson 2002) require data that are official, cover relevant themes, enable intersectional analyses, and are disaggregated at the city or municipal level—as the next section discusses.

Enhanced gender data: what are they?

First, unofficial data, no matter how professional and robust, can be easily delegitimized by counter-movement actors or veto coalitions. One key example is violence

against transgender individuals. At present, civil society organizations are the ones producing the most encompassing databases available. For example, in Brazil, a pro-LGBTQI + group has been collecting information on the violent deaths of trans individuals, and their data, when analyzed comparatively, indicate that this country is possibly the most violent in the world in this regard. However, former President Bolsonaro, notorious for his anti-sexual minority rhetoric and who received support from religious voters, especially Pentecostal Evangelicals (Bohn 2022), cast doubt on the veracity of the information, stating it was from an untrustworthy source. Having official data, thus, is particularly important for GEMs tackling the so-called doctrinal issues (Htun and Weldon, 2018), around which "adversarial policy communities" (Dudley and Richardson 1996) tend to form.

Second, undoing gender data gaps involves collecting official data on themes that match contemporary social changes, including issues previously overlooked. While most censuses and official statistics nowadays collect data on women's unpaid work, several lack information, for example, on child marriage of girls, sexual trafficking of women, intimate partner violence in homosexual relationships and some of the phenomena already mentioned—such as same-sex families, femicide, and violence against transgender and queer individuals, among others. Third, official data must allow for intersectional analyses beyond a dichotomy of sexes. For GEMs to develop inclusive plans of action, they must be able to compare the lived experiences of self-identified women across distinct racial-ethnic, class, religious and (if pertinent) linguistic belongings, contrasting those with the experiences of self-identified men and non-binary individuals across those same indicators. As the depth of the "coloniality of power" (Quijano and Innis, 2000: 534) resulted in enduring legacies throughout every nook and cranny of postcolonial societies, this kind of information is of particular relevance to societies where the colonial project relied on enslavement and its imposed oppressive racial-based social hierarchies. Importantly, enhanced data suitable to an intersectional lens enable GEMs to understand diffuse, pan-group gender-based demands as well as specific in-group claims. Additionally, they facilitate the identification of weakly organized groups who nevertheless hold overlooked gendered demands and with whom GEMs need to consult.

Fourth, official data with national coverage must allow for city or municipality-level disaggregation, as in most societies, social interests are not necessarily evenly spread across the territory (Vickers 1994). The same applies to the offer of public services needed to implement gender-centric policies. Their spatial distribution tends to be imbalanced, usually eschewed in favor of metropolitan areas and larger cities, to the detriment of rural regions and smaller cities and towns (Bohn 2020). Those types of data enable GEMs to devise policy plans that account for the potentially asymmetrical territorial distribution of social interests and state capacity.

Finally, what counts as data needs to be problematized. Rather than strictly associating data exclusively with census information or official tallies of the population, GEMs should rely on a variety of official, professionally gathered information that does not treat gender merely as a variable (Stacey and Thorne 1985) and includes "narrative data" (Thorne 2006). As Strydom et al. (2010) state, "evidence also includes economic, attitudinal, behavioral and anecdotal evidence, together with knowledge and expertise of experts, as well as lay persons, …local knowledge and

culture." This broadening of the definition of what constitutes evidence serves a dual purpose for GEMs. First, it facilitates knowledge acquisition about underserved gender-based groups that is anchored on their lived experiences as recounted by them (Smith 1987). Moreover, it supports more symbiotic relations between state actors and civil society groups, potentially easing their inclusion within GEM-sponsored state arenas.

To accomplish those objectives, GEMs should implement (if they have that capability) or advocate for the implementation of data systems where the state agencies' responsibilities are clearly defined, especially regarding data collection, analysis, maintenance of repositories, and public disclosure of anonymized data that comply with existing privacy laws. Simplified data collection forms should be prioritized, as they reduce collection and upkeep costs and may lessen political actors' resistance to picking up those costs, whether partially or fully. Lastly, it is imperative to have standardized data across governmental levels, especially in federal countries, devolved unitary systems, and polities where subnational governments have exclusive policy jurisdictions.

Caveats and perils

One first obstacle GEMs intent on undoing gender data lacunae face is that capable state bureaucracies are not ubiquitous. While countries with weak state capacity can have islands of bureaucratic excellence, some nation-states might lack the state capacity that GEMs need to leverage to produce enhanced gender data. Second, GEMs' involvement in state capacity creation could drain their resources and attention from policy debates that are more pressing and for which the agencies already have a good understanding. Third, elected officials might be unwilling to create local-level, meso-level, or national-state capacity or resist policy implementation despite robust evidence-based policy plans.

Finally, in some quarters, such as illiberal democracies, non-democratic countries, and those with a recent authoritarian past, the state apparatus might have superb state capacity in several, if not all, policy areas. Nevertheless, in those circumstances, information produced by civil society organizations may be more credible than the available official data. Nevertheless, in those cases, if they exist, GEMs either lack or have limited freedom of action to devise gender-centric policies—which exposes the interconnectedness between GEMs and a democratic order (McBride and Mazur 2010).

Conclusion

GEMs' work on undoing gender data gaps is essential to its fundamental objective of creating a more gender-equitable society. To obtain those data, machineries must consult gender-based groups to understand their grievances. In addition to obtaining situational knowledge and uncovering unknown or known but under-investigated dynamics, this process can help GEMs create symbiotic relationships with

equity-seeking gender groups. More importantly, enhanced gender data allow GEMs to devise evidence-based policies and programs. From the viewpoint of civil society actors, being consulted about their lived experiences is an opportunity to articulate demands, making a programmatic entry into the state. Furthermore, enhanced gender data provide gender-centric groups with materials with which to mobilize for recognition and agitate for policy design, implementation, and monitoring.

On the flip side, as discussed, the search for enhanced gender data could overstretch the GEM, leading it to try to engage subnational elected authorities to create state capacity to collect data or to implement the evidence-based policies that the machinery designed, shepherded through the approval process, and wants to see executed. For gender-centric groups, the publicization of previously unknown gendered dynamics made possible by enhanced gender data could mobilize counter-movements opposing any advances in the issues at stake, particularly when they involve doctrinal questions.

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ROUNDTABLE

Gender equality machinery (GEM) and democratic reversal: research agendas in Latin America

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Abstract

This note analyzes GEM's research agenda in Latin America amid democratic reversals. Contextually, two factors are highlighted: the rise of conservative anti-gender actors and high levels of intersectional inequalities challenging plural and democratic feminist political projects. From this, three discussions are proposed: (1) conceptualizing success and GEMs, (2) advancing comparative analysis of insiders in Latin America, and (3) integrating intersectional and dissident sexualities in the future research.

Keywords Gender equality machinery · Latin America · Intersectionality · Backlash · Democratic reversal · State feminism

Latin American GEMs in context

This note examines research agendas on GEMs in Latin America. To do so, we must first place GEMs within a changing context. According to the Latino Barometer, the proportion of Catholics in Latin America decreased by nearly 18 percentage points since 2000, while the evangelical population nearly doubled. However, significant differences exist among countries. In Guatemala and Honduras, nearly 40% identify as evangelical or Protestant. Conversely, Uruguay has low Catholic (37.5%) and evangelical (4%) percentages, with 31% identifying as non-religious. Brazil shows a consistent decline in Catholicism and rapid growth in evangelicalism, while Mexico differs, with Catholicism decreasing from 80 to 77% and evangelicalism rising from 0.7 to 8.8% (Zaremberg and Rezende 2022).

This landscape of religious beliefs witnessed the emergence of political expressions rooted in both religious and non-religious anti-gender conservatisms (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Zaremberg et al. 2021). Conservative anti-gender agendas are surfacing in Latin American countries through varied

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political patterns as the formation of openly religious-oriented parties (Brazil) or alongside alliances between secular parties and religious bases and organizations (as in Argentina, Chile or Peru) (Pérez Guadalupe and Grundberger 2018). It is worth noting that left-wing parties, often associated with promoting pro-gender agendas in the literature, do not uniformly operate this way in Latin America.

Regarding GEMs, the anti-gender conservative agenda may lead to drastic measures, such as the disappearance of GEMs (as currently seen under Milei in Argentina) or their transformation into conservative, family-oriented institutions (as during Bolsonaro's administration in Brazil). Threats can also manifest subtly, like defunding GEMs (as debated in Mexico) or rendering them weak or symbolic (as in Guatemala or Argentina under Cristina Kirchner's administration, where the catalyst for pro-gender policies was the plural feminist movement rather than the GEM, see Rodríguez Gustá 2021).

Then, in that context, it is crucial to conceptualize GEMs as actors located in a broad geometry of power, not to discard the power triangles or rectangles but to broaden the scope of a relational analysis. Following Roggeband y Krizsán (2020), it is convenient to think about a triangle where the vertices are the State (government), the feminist movement, and the conservative anti-gender movement or counter-movement. This triangle shows that the feminist and the conservative anti-gender movements dispute the State at the same time.

Why this contextualization is important? The awareness of this context changes some perspectives—for example, the concept of success and successful GEMs.

When interacting with the state, feminist movements do not operate independently; they are simultaneously challenging governmental bodies alongside their adversaries. Thus, engaging with the government entails promoting a feminist agenda and also (and this is pivotal) thwarting adversaries from exploiting the same institutional arenas.

Comparing feminist pro-choice networks in Mexico and Brazil, Zaremberg and Rezende (2022) found that in Brazil, before Bolsonaro's administration, the networks thwarted over 154 conservative anti-abortion bills (2003–2021), though not enacting pro-choice legislation. The Brazilian GEM, alongside Ministry of Health insiders and activists, resisted pressures during Dilma Roussef's impeachment, preventing the elimination of raped women's access to termination protocols in the Universal Health System (Abers and Tatagiba 2015). Brazil's success, akin to Mexico, lies in different realms: Mexico in passing the Legal Interruption of Pregnancy (ILE) in 2007 and Brazil in impeding conservative anti-choice actions.

This example brings us to a second discussion, related to the role and the profile types developed by insiders in various IMGs in Latin America.

Insiders in Latin American GEMs

Scholarship research confirms that officials within GEMs are crucial. In the case of Latin American GEMs, officials show some particularities.

First and foremost, they do not find solid civil service careers that form stable and professionalized bureaucracies in Latin America (with variations).[1] This implies that changes in parties in government tend to replace personnel who have been trained and committed to gender perspectives.

An evaluation in Mexico post-gender perspective training for Gender Units officials in the Federal Public Administration (FPA) in 2012 found that a year later, 40% had left their positions due to a change in government. This issue worsens as Ministries assign minimal staff to gender branches, often leading to solitary management. Despite this, a "critical mass" of officials trained in gender perspectives and supportive of feminism persists, albeit transitioning across various public positions, including subnational levels or other government branches (Zaremberg 2014).

Future research could explore the hypothesis that the most stable insiders in Latin America are often those within the judicial rather than executive power. Paradigmatic examples from Mexico and Colombia showcase the influence of insiders in the judicial branch, enabling feminist agendas and blocking anti-gender conservative actions. These countries have seen social movements, particularly the feminist movement, specializing in socio-legal mobilization to defend their goals, notably concerning doctrinal issues like abortion (Ruibal 2021).

On the other hand, Latin American countries formally advanced in creating budgets oriented by gender perspective. However, an effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of these budgets continue to be a substantive challenge because, in "Latin America and the Caribbean until 2021, only 13% of countries had systems in place to monitor budget allocations for gender equality" (UN Women 2022). In addition, gender budgets are very sensible to economical crisis in the region. Departments or areas dedicated to gender mainstreaming policies are often the first in the list to face budget cuts.

Despite facing significant obstacles, many women committed to mainstreaming gender policies within GEMs deepen their dedication to this agenda, achieving remarkable results given their challenging working conditions. Some come from backgrounds of activism within the feminist movement, leveraging networks of alliance amidst isolation within precarious State. These networks, bolstering feminist activism, foster an informal, pragmatic institutional activism distinct from stable, professional bureaucracies. Additionally, evidence suggests these insiders could serve as a first barrier against anti-gender conservative backlash (Abers 2020).

This suggests a research avenue for comparative studies on insiders and their institutional activism circumstances. Future research on GEMs and their support branches should explore the types of insiders or activists' trajectories based on state and feminist movement contexts. Questions arise: When and why do we expect to see artisanal or technical insiders? What are the effects (double workdays, burnout,

[1] The Expert Survey on Governance Quality, based on public administration evaluations, reveals significant politicization, with the public administration rated lower in professionalism compared to G20 and OECD countries. Even top performers like Brazil and Costa Rica lag behind. Many Latin American and Caribbean countries employ a sizable portion of non-permanent personnel, such as Chile (57%), Peru (40%), and Argentina (34%) (Development and Bank 2020).

etc.) of artisanal activism versus technical activism? Also, how do insiders behave in areas addressing Indigenous and Afro-Latin American populations in Latin America's marginal territories?

Intersectional and sexuality dissidences

The feminist movement in Latin America exhibits diversity and interacts with states in various ways. Arguments focused on grassroots activism distant to GEMs consider the State not only as patriarchal but also as a colonial and as a criminal actor (or a *narco-state*) (See Segato 2013; Suárez Navaz y Hernández Castillo 2008; Lugones 2008, 2011). These views are frequent in the Latin American feminist context, for good reasons.

First, initial versions of GEMs were usually promoted by white, urban, well educated, internationally connected (particularly after Beijing 95) women activists far from the demands and needs of indigenous and afro women. Then, the critical juncture that led to an expansion of IMGs in Latin America does not reflect fairly intersectional inequalities (Gargallo 2006).

Second, when evaluate the inter-institutional links between GEMs and governmental areas dedicated to offer goods and services for indigenous and Afro-Latin women, the disconnection could be astonish in some countries. This varies in relation to the history of the indigenous and black movements, the history of feminist and women movements, and with the history within the State in each country.

In Mexico, a country with a significant indigenous population,[2] gender inequality among indigenous women exceeds that between them and indigenous men and is notably higher compared to urban white women. Resources constraints further hinder gender mainstreaming policies, with even less allocation for indigenous and Afro populations. GEM's policies rarely reach local territories. In Latin America, including an intersectional dimension in studying GEMs implies the unavoidable consideration of the subnational dimension.

On the other hand, the black women's movement (particularly in Brazil) exhibits distinct characteristics. Organized autonomously since the 1980s, it gained momentum with the introduction of racial quotas in universities, spurring intersectional discourse dissemination and notably through black women's organizations presence trhough participatory institutions since 2003 (Matos and Alvarez 2018; Rodrigues and Gonçalves Freitas 2021; Rios et al. 2018).

Furthermore (and third), the heavy reliance of the region on commodity resources has fueled the expansion of large-scale extractive projects, particularly affecting indigenous lands. In response, indigenous communal feminism has emerged to resist neo-extractive industries endorsed by Latin American governments. For instance, influential figures in Guatemala advocate for a feminism centered on healing the body through earth protection, viewing this process as emancipatory (Cabnal 2010).

[2] Mexico has 16,933,283 indigenous people, 15.1% of the population. Despite adopting UN declarations on indigenous rights since 1992, challenges persist (IWGIA 2023).

Similarly, Aymara and Quechua women in Peru spearhead the defense of their territories (Paredes and Guzmán 2014; Korol 2016).

Fourth, Latino American States are ineffective against criminal organized violence. Particularly, Latin America stands out for the intensity and growth in femicides. GEMs are also not capable to confront this phenomenon successfully. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 14 out of the world's 25 countries with the highest rates of femicides are situated (out of a monitored total of 221 countries). Moreover, only in 2 out of every 100 cases are the perpetrators prosecuted[3] (Segato 2014).

Innovative interactions between sidestreaming feminist actions and Latin American States emerge despite the widening gap between marginalized women and state institutions. For example, Indigenous women's movements in Bolivia and Ecuador have leveraged legislative and constitutional reforms (Espinoza 2011; Pacari 2004; Prieto et al. 2005). However, studies suggest that GEMs may have weakened during these periods (Perea Ozerin 2017).

Finally, the relationship between LGBTQ+ networks, organizations, and GEMs in Latin America, also deserves reflection. In last years, an increasing conflict between a biologist and transphobic feminism and an inclusive non-binary pro-LGBTQ+ rights feminism has been deepened in many aspects, including regarding the role and scope of GEMs.

On this issue, some practical, political, and even epistemological conflicts arise (See Valcárcel 2019; Miyares 2017). About pragmatic issues: some events suggest that trying to include more tasks for new beneficiaries within GEMs that have budget restrictions produces rejections and escalates conflicts. In addition, some cases include political opportunism from governors that try to condense several agendas in the same institution without increment the budget. On the other hand, other conflicts arise in scenarios that fight for parity. Intense discussions, both legal and political, often arise when transgender candidates try to access electoral lists arguing a parity-based principle. It also prompts consultations with GEMs (See Soto Fregoso 2019).

However, from my perspective and based on research results, pragmatic disputes must be distinguished from philosophical and political projects. Recent research suggests that pluralism does not weaken the political subject of feminism, contrary to arguments by some transphobic feminists. Evidence indicates that broad synergy among dynamic feminist networks strengthens the movement against conservative anti-gender attacks (Zaremberg and Rezende 2022). Articulating LGBTQ+ and traditional feminist agendas enables a more effective challenge to conservative notions of family, promoting pluralistic family models. Families have long been a focal point of feminist movements for achieving democratic social regimes (Orloff 1996). Future research should compare experiences of GEMs implementing simultaneously gender equity and diversity perspectives, like in Argentina, with those that do not, such as Mexico. Evaluations must distinguish between technical implications and

[3] In Mexico in 2021, 70.1% of women aged 15 and older experienced one form of violence (psychological, economic, physical, sexual, etc.). In 2023, 112,113 disappearances were recorded. Since 2007, violent deaths of women and femicides have surged due to the war on narco-trafficking (García 2021).

normative goals. Feminist movements played vital roles in Latin American democratic transitions and must maintain democratic and inclusive approaches to counter autocratic regressions.

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ROUNDTABLE

Anti-democratic maneuvers and state feminism in Jordan: lessons for research in an autocratic context

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Abstract

This research note presents three lessons, drawn from the case of Jordan, for studying GEMs in autocratic countries. I discuss three interrelated points: (1) the relationship between state feminist institutions and "autocratic genderwashing" (Bjarnegård and Petterberg 2022); (2) the connections between GEMs and independent feminist movements; and (3) the enduring/emerging salience of "traditional family values" as an obstacle for gender equality pursuits. I argue that, while GEMs in autocratic contexts can advance gender equality measures, they are constrained by state power and interests. Moreover, rather than enhancing democratic performance, GEMs in illiberal states can become part of the autocratic playbook for sidestepping democratic reform. As such, the global research agenda on GEMs should include rigorous empirical analyses of how GEMs, democrats, and women's rights activists work with (or against) authoritarian regimes, as well as analyses of how gender equality efforts might enable the entrenchment of autocratic power.

Keywords Jordan · State Feminism · Gender Equality Machinery

As the robust scholarship on gender equality machineries (GEMs) has established, these institutions are critical for improving the status of women. Ideally, GEMs ensure that regular attention is paid to gender equality in government decision-making processes and concretize pathways, whereby women's civil society actors can influence governance practices (Goetz 2023; McBride and Mazur 2013; OSCE 2023). Of course, not all GEMs meet this ideal. For instance, an enduring feature of state feminist institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is that the state often uses women's machineries to advance its own interests (Allam 2019; Geha and Karam 2021). Moreover, state feminism in illiberal regimes is often at odds with autonomous feminist organizations and movements and can undermine

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broader efforts aimed at radical gender justice. What, then, might an analysis of gender equality machineries in a nondemocracy teach us about GEMs and state feminism in the context of democratic backsliding? Put differently, what can we learn about GEMs and state feminism in democracies by analyzing nondemocracies?

In this research note, I discuss three interrelated points regarding state feminism in Jordan: (1) the relationship between state feminist institutions and "autocratic genderwashing" (Bjarnegård and Petterberg 2022); (2) the connections between GEMs and independent feminist movements; and (3) the enduring/emerging salience of "family values" as an obstacle for gender equality pursuits. Taken together, my discussion of GEMs and state feminism in Jordan suggest that we need to stand attuned to the ways that policies and institutions, even those that do not explicitly invoke gender, interact and shape institutional mechanisms for gender equality. Our analyses need to consider how poor democratic performances across a variety of institutions, laws, and practices can undermine the power and potential of gender equality machineries for deepening democratic performance.

Autocratic genderwashing and state feminism

A spate of international protocols like the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security have established the importance of gender equality as indicator of democratic progress and good governance in the international arena. Perhaps surprisingly, in the years since the proliferation of these norms and protocols, autocratic regimes have been at the forefront of adopting women friendly policies, instituting gender quotas, and establishing GEMs (Bush and Zetterberg 2024; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Hughes, et al. 2019; Tripp 2019).

Given this propensity, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) coined the term "autocratic genderwashing" to describe how autocratic governments adopt women rights in an effort to demonstrate their democratic credentials, "while drawing the focus away from persistent authoritarian practices" (61). Genderwashing suggests that authoritarian regimes promote gender equality because of its association with democratic advancements, while simultaneously engaging in autocratic practices; gender equality advancements thus "whitewash" or obscure persistent antidemocratic practices (Bardall 2019; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). While, this concept is similar to "policy evaporation" (OSCE 2023, 23), where governments adopt policies which they have no plan to implement, autocratic genderwashing suggests that states actively and intentionally use women's rights to distract from their enduring nondemocratic and authoritarian practices.

Autocratic genderwashing is relevant to a discussion of state feminism as it suggests that GEMs can serve as an instrument of authoritarian regimes (see also Arat 2022). In contrast to established democracies, where GEMs have the potential to enable greater representation of marginalized groups and facilitate intersectional alliances, GEMs in autocratic contexts can legitimize authoritarian leaders, further consolidate their power, and distract from ongoing or worsening antidemocratic

practices. For instance, following the worst terrorist attack in Jordan's history in 2005, the regime passed a series of anti-terrorism laws that undermined press freedoms, as well as a controversial NGO law that curbed the right to assembly. Additionally, Jordan's 2007 elections were widely recognized as fraudulent, with credible accounts of government sponsored vote-rigging (Ryan 2008; Wilcke 2007). At the same time, however, the regime loudly publicized advancements that it had made around women's rights, including by establishing and supporting the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA), one of Jordan's government-sponsored institutes tasked with addressing gender-based violence in the country (see Forester 2019).

Jordan's approach yielded international benefits: in June 2006, the UN elected Jordan to the newly formed Human Rights Council. When announcing its candidacy, the Jordanian delegation emphasized how "Jordan's commitment to the empowerment of women and gender equality has been a priority in national policy" (UN Human Rights Council 2006) as evidence of its commendable human rights record, despite mounting evidence that the regime was simultaneously engaging in human rights violations and accelerating down an undemocratic path. What is more, because the regime used its gender policies and institutional mechanisms instrumentally—especially those aimed at addressing violence against women—it has done very little to meaningfully implement the policies (Forester 2024).

In essence, then, Jordan used its state feminism machinery to help legitimize itself in the international arena (see Tripp 2019) and, further, this legitimation helped it sidestep making meaningful democratic advancements domestically. What does this discussion of autocratic genderwashing teach us about GEMs and democratic backsliding? While, we are currently witnessing attacks on feminism and gender justice by both authoritarians and backsliding democracies, there exists yet another way that authoritarians engage with institutional mechanisms for women's rights: to actually inoculate themselves *against* democratizing.

I am not suggesting that GEMs or gender policies are meaningless. Instead, this suggests that part of the research agenda on GEMs should be a careful, empirical assessment of how political institutions connect and function together in service to democratic advancements. Democracy and progressive gender norms are tightly bundled (Donno et al. 2022), and this connection should not be undone. However, it is necessary to take a clear-eyed assessment of how gender equality initiatives fit into a country's broader landscape of (non)democratic practices. In the following section, I discuss how autocratic governments can undermine feminist civil society, another important element for enhanced democratic performance (Mazur, this issue).

(Dis)Connections between State Feminism and Civil Society

Mazur (this volume) notes that GEM success "can only happen with willing partners in civil society, government and at the international level" (page). In line with research in comparative gender politics, Mazur's finding emphasizes the importance of active and autonomous women's movements for catalyzing IM success in established and emerging democracies. However, scholarship on authoritarian and

backsliding regimes, like Egypt and Turkey, suggests that such governments can intentionally marginalize independent women's NGOs and empower ones friendly to the state instead (Allam 2019; Arat 2022; also see Tajali, this issue). Jordan, too, has clamped down on civil society actors and actions that run counter to the state's interests (Forester 2024; Sander 2023). A longtime feminist activist and lawyer in Amman reiterated that state surveillance of activists and subtle threats have had a chilling effect on feminist activism. As she noted:

> Generally, there is a sense of the government keeping people in check. Even I have really toned it down…I'm doing quiet work, but the political structure necessitates that. The King and his senate appointees have to approve everything. And, the security operatives are everywhere…So we're finding subtle ways to do social change. Not big, not risky. Not related to political change or law change, just one on one interactions to support people. (Interview 1)

Similarly, another activist opined that women's rights campaigns need to align with the government's interests; if they don't, then the state finds a way to undermine them (interview 2). For example, organizations may be denied permits for protests and events, offices may be investigated, and funding streams denied (Forester 2024; Sander 2023). Nermin Allam (2019) documented similar dynamics in Egypt; state-sponsored feminism in Egypt "…appears to function in support of the women's rights agenda at large, [but] it is simultaneously characterized by the counterproductive targeting of independent women's rights organizations" (375).

In this way, authoritarian regimes snuff out part of the catalytic spark for the chain reaction. They undermine and constrain the ability of independent civil society to engage in robust forms of contentious politics and to pursue their own agendas. More pointedly, state-sponsored feminism in illiberal regimes *impedes* the development of an autonomous and significant women's rights agenda (Allam 2019). GEMs in these contexts can still advance women's interests, but they are certainly limited in the range of actions and initiatives they can pursue (Allam 2019; Arat 2022).

The enduring and emerging sanctity of "family values"

The previous two points demonstrate how GEMs in authoritarian regimes diverge from the patterns and practices of GEMs in established and emerging democracies. In this final section, I discuss how the sanctity and saliency of "family values" cuts across different regime types and can shape the trajectory of institutional mechanisms for gender equality.

Autocratic and illiberal leaders from across the world have politicized the idea of "traditional family values" in an effort to make the subjugation of women acceptable to both men and conservative women (Chenoweth and Marks 2022; Tajali, this issue). The traditional family values trope perpetuates the idea that there are natural gender roles for men and women, with women roles being tied to reproduction and homemaking. In contrast to the specter of "gender ideology" (Corredor 2019) which is cast as dangerous and threatening to society and state stability, uplifting and protecting

traditional family values simultaneously uplifts and protects the state (Chenoweth and Marks 2022; see also Forester 2019).

Writing on Egypt, Hind Zaki (2015) explicitly demonstrates how state feminism in Egypt "is deeply influenced by a belief in the sanctity of the family, and in women's traditional roles in it according to certain interpretations of Islamic Shari'a" (44). This coheres with Mona Tajali's research on conservative gender ideologies and national women's machineries in Iran (this issue, see also Tajali 2023). What is more, in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, constitutions establish the (heteronormative) family as the basis of society and invoke masculine protection of women (Aldoughli 2019; Forester 2024; Zaki 2015).

Such a framing not only provides a powerful counter to feminist activism, it reinforces societal norms about patriarchal power. A young activist in Jordan observed that "…marriage and work, surgery, my clothes…all of this is mediated through the family. And anytime I critique any of this—any time any feminist critiques any of this—we face the argument that we are against families, the country, we are against the stability of society" (interview 3). Indeed, the prevailing norms about the sanctity of the family shaped the way that state feminist organizations in Jordan pursued legislation on violence against women. Rather than advocating for a bill on gender-based violence, activists pursued a policy on *family* violence (see Forester 2019). This suggests that the state's view of and societal norms about family values can powerfully shape the trajectory of feminist initiatives.

Beyond Jordan, illiberal leaders from a range of regions and countries invoke the family and traditional family values in their conservative agendas. From Brazil to Russia, the US to Turkey, populist leaders have endeavored to dismantle or restructure GEMs (Goetz 2023). While some institutions are eradicated entirely, others are reframed or replaced with some version of the Ministry of the Family. For instance, in Brazil, one of Jair Bolsonaro's first moves was to rename and replace the Human Rights Secretariat with The Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights (Garcia 2019; Goetz 2023); further, the Ministry's mission was revised so that it no longer had the mandate to protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (ibid). In the US under Trump, "discursive 'cleansing' was undertaken through combing out words like 'gender' and 'fetus', to the point that…'[the US] now aligned with Russia on family issues'" (Goetz 2023, 133).

The range of cases mentioned here suggest that there's no single way that illiberal and authoritarian leaders manipulate and use "traditional family values" to mobilize opposition to gender justice efforts. Part of the emergent research agenda should be to comparatively analyze how different regions and regimes use family values as part of their antigender frameworks. Moreover, such a comparison will also help us understand how GEMs and democrats withstand rollbacks or use family values frames to their own ends.

Conclusion

Through my discussion of autocratic genderwashing, the connections between state feminist institutions and broader civil society, and the anti-feminist utility of the "traditional family values" trope, I derive a few key conclusions that might spark future research questions. Because some states instrumentally use GEMs and gender equality campaigns to color over enduring antidemocratic practices, I contend that further research is necessary to clarify how authoritarian states use gender reforms to evade democratizing. Along this same line, how do autocratic tactics differ from or overlap with those used by leaders in backsliding democracies? At first glance, it seems like autocratic regimes quietly undermine women's rights, while backsliding democracies publicize their efforts to dismantle gender justice reforms.

To reiterate a point from the text, I am not suggesting that advancements made through instrumentalized institutions will not benefit women. Even poor policies for women are better than no policies. Rather, this discussion presses us as scholars to consider the myriad ways that gender equality mechanisms intersect with democratic performance across a variety of measures. How, for example, might the suppression of free speech undermine feminist critiques of "family values" tropes? How do threats against the autonomous feminist movement shape the kind of campaigns that state feminist institutions can pursue? Such questions will help us precisely articulate how and to what extent GEMs function as critical actors and how the state conditions different outcomes.

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ROUNDTABLE

Rhetorical attacks on gender equality machineries in Spain: lessons for studying the new backlash

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Abstract

The far-right political party in Spain, Vox, devalues women's policy machineries through its critical rhetoric about gender and equality policies. This note puts forth two rhetorical strategies utilized by the party, ideographs and victim contests; and it argues that these strategies communicate to the public that women's policy machineries are not necessary or appropriate. Consequently, the party's rhetoric has noticeably challenged the previous consensus in Spain around using women's policy machineries to improve and save women's lives.

Keywords Spain · Gender · Equality · Rhetoric · Women · Politics

Introduction

This note, similar to policy framing studies (Lombardo and Forest 2015, 223; Lombardo 2008), employs a discursive approach to gauge what rhetorical strategies the far-right uses to critique gender equality machineries (GEMs) and purport normative ideas about them. I define normative ideas as "what is good or bad about" policies and "what one ought to do" regarding policies (Schmidt 2008, 306). According to Schmidt, "normative ideas…attach values to political action" and reference "their appropriateness" (Schmidt 2008, 307).

The far-right political party in Spain, Vox, uses rhetorical strategies, in the media and within government institutions, to communicate to the public that gender equality machineries are *not* necessary or appropriate. Other actors—citizens and journalists—adopt these discourses and normative ideas as well. This note identifies the rhetorical

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strategies of ideographs and victim contests in order to analyze how the far-right in Spain attacks GEMs. Before doing so, I summarize GEMs in Spain and the growing backlash of the political right against them.

GEMs and the right-wing in Spain

Some scholars previously believed that Spain was immune to developing a successful far-right due to the public's antipathy toward Francisco Franco's far-right, authoritarian regime (1939–1975). However, in the late 2010s, Spain ceased to be the "exception to the rule" in Europe, a world region that had seen an upswing in the far-right support since the 1990s (Ramos Antón and Baptista 2022, 128; Mudde 2019). The far-right in Spain before the 2010s was small, disaggregated, and electorally unsuccessful, whereas Vox, founded in 2013, has become "the third political force in Spain" (Rubén Antón and Baptista 2022, 128). Vox won 12.4 percent of the vote in June 2023 national election, and the center-right Popular Party (PP) and center-left Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) won 33.1 and 31.7 percent, respectively.

Carles Ferreira classifies Vox as a far-right party on account of its emphases on nationalism, nativism, traditional values, anti-democracy, populism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism (2019). In terms of traditional values, the party stands against feminism, LGBTQ movements, abortion, and euthanasia; and it favors a so-called culture of life and the traditional family (Bernardez-Rodal et al. 2020; Ferreira 2019; Cabezas 2022). Similar to far-right actors in other countries, Vox harnesses gender as a "tool of political antagonism" (Grzebalska and Petö 2018, 165–66), and it uses social media to lodge accusations against the left, including what it calls "shady feminist organizations" and the "LGTBI lobby" (Ramos Antón and Baptista 2022, 139). Vox has never led the national government, but it has been in coalition with the PP in some regions and municipalities. In these governing capacities, and in its role as the opposition, Vox speaks critically about gender equality machineries in order to devalue them. Unlike the center-right PP that has offered modest support of GEMs since the 1990s (Valiente 2008), which had led to a consensus about the worth of GEMs among the right and left, Vox believes that GEMs have been thrust upon Spain by an "ideology of gender" from the left (Rey Ibarra 2021, 17). Given Vox's neoliberal stance, it seeks to reduce state programs which, in turn, has significant implications for GEMs.

It should be noted that GEMs exist in Spain at the subnational and national level (Ortbals 2008). The national Women's Institute (WI) was established in 1983, and the Ministry of Equality, in which the WI is now located, was a cabinet-level department in the Rodríguez Zapatero administration from 2008 to 2010 and is again in the Sánchez administration.

Ideographs as a rhetorical strategy: Chiringuitos of gender

Rhetorical studies understand ideographs as words that serve as "building blocks" of ideology (McGee 1980, 7). Ideographs are highly recognizable single words, phrases, or symbols that are persuasive and that "symbolize the line of [a particular

ideological] argument" or worldview (McGee 1980, 7). For instance, "pussyhats" and "black lives matter" each signify beliefs and normative debates about appropriate political actions. Ideographs, which consist of one or few words, resonate incredibly well in an age of social media and sound bites; hashtags, a modern-day form of the ideograph, can be artistic and inviting, thus leading audiences to reject or embrace political aims (Riddick 2023). Ideographs are "filled with power that has accumulated over" time and can come to be accepted as common knowledge (Boyd 2018, 148), yet they are also flexible enough to take on new meanings and are subject to contestation.

The phrase "*chiringuitos de género*" is an ideograph in Spanish politics that symbolizes the rejection of gender equality policies. I argue that the phrase contains two ideographs—*chiringuitos públicos* and gender—that have merged to become an additional ideograph. The word chiringuito means beach café or refreshment stall; etymologically, the word references coffee breaks taken by sugarcane workers in Cuba. In the 1940s, a bar owner used the term as a name for his cafe outside of Barcelona and the term's usage spread to beach establishments in other parts of Spain. Two additional meanings of chiringuito emerged later: *chiringuito financiaro* and *chiringuito público*. The former represents a business entity that exists in the informal economy and lacks proper registration with the authorities—an entity like a refreshment stall. Chiringuito público references financial misgivings and corruption by government officials. Vox used chiringuito público to critique corruption in the PP in the mid-2010s, and the party increasingly invoked it during the 2018 regional election in Andalusia as a way to allege clientelism on the part of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), which had governed the region for decades. The normative ideas expressed by the ideograph of chiringuito público are that certain public expenditures are suspect, akin to corruption, and should be eliminated. For Vox, policies related to environmental activism (referred to as *chiringuitos ecoterroristas*), sexuality (referred to as *chiringuitos LGTBIQ+*), and women's rights (referred to as *chiringuitos de género* or *chiringuitos feministas* or *chiringuitos feminazi*) are suspect and constitute a ploy by Leftists to use taxpayer money to promote a radical agenda.

The concept of gender can be associated rhetorically with positive outcomes for women—gender equality, gender responsiveness, and gender budgeting (Hennebry 2018), but when it is invoked by Vox, it connotes inappropriateness, and it is turned into "a language of contention" (Cabezas 2022, 338). Gender or the so-called gender ideology (*ideología de género*) is considered inappropriate because of gender's perceived ties to globalism and elitism and its alleged potential to violate freedoms. Vox's social media posts are "devoted toward delegitimizing and ridiculing" feminism and gender (Bernandez-Rodal et al. 2020, 275), and this dismissive tone transforms gender into a persuasive shorthand message (i.e., an ideograph) instructing citizens to devalue and abandon feminist policy responses.

If gender invokes the view that feminist policy responses are ridiculous or even dangerous, *chiringuitos de género* implies that the pursuit of said policies is a waste of money and a form of corruption that needs to be rooted out. María de los Reyes Romero Vilches, a Vox deputy, in the Congress of Deputies in 2023, expressed this sentiment when she said,

> VOX has been denouncing for years what is now an outcry and that no one can deny: the Ministry of Equality consumes too many public resources for the services it lends to Spanish society, and the results of its policies are painful and counterproductive to the goals it claims to pursue….its strategy [is] to live off of [*parasitar*] all institutions by creating *chiringuitos de género* in each department of the Administration (Congreso de Diputados 2023, 42)

Claims of waste, ineffectiveness, and clientelism come from Vox itself but also from the media. Journalist Marcos Ondarra, citing the ministry's 575 million Euro budget in 2023, called the ministry "useless" and a "chiringuito" that is responsible for the "release of rapists" (Ondarra 2023). Regarding the latter, Ondarra is referencing the "only yes is yes" consent law pursued by the Ministry of Equality in 2022, which is controversial for inadvertently lowering the sentences of sex offenders instead of strengthening them. The disputed law notwithstanding, the ideograph functions here to critique the ministry as grossly counterproductive *over a stretch of time* and for its reach into *various nodes of the state*.

In 2022, another journalist asserted the Ministry of Equality's reach into the subnational level (Pérez Navarro 2022). The journalist indicated that the ministry was useless and alleged a costly new chiringuito in the form of Municipal Schools for Equality, which seek to train local politicians and bureaucrats in issues of gender equality and are a collaboration between the national Women's Institute and the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces. Vox has also criticized the networks of municipal women's centers established by regional governments. In 2019, Vox called out the Andalusian Women's Institute for waste and pointed to municipalities and their women's centers as 61.2% of the institute's budget (Grasso and Álvarez 2019).

It should be noted that the journalist who criticized the Municipal Schools for Equality emphasized that the Minister of Equality at that time, Irene Montero, was personally at fault for the chiringuitos. The journalist charged Montero with increasing her ministry's "budget considerably each year" in an effort to "continue connecting her friends to the chiringuitos of her ministry" (Pérez Navarro 2022). Referencing friends and calling the municipal network "the new chiringuito de Irene Montero" demonstrate how the ideograph calls attention to personal misconduct and clientelism related to GEMs. Claims of clientelism extend to the relationships between GEMs and women's associations, regarding which the latter often receive grants from the former. For instance, Vox calls the 2000 + women's associations in Andalusia a "feminist industry" of the left that is comprised of "2000 + chiringuitos" (Grasso and Álvarez 2019).

Feminist and GEMs alike challenge the ideograph of chiringuitos de género. Most poignantly, in 2021, Ángela Rodríguez, the Secretary of State for Equality and Against Gender Violence (2021–23), disputed the claims of Vox's Yolonda Merelo Palomares who had asserted in the Senate that the Ministry of Equality is "totalitarian," "corrupt," and an "immense and grotesque setup" (Senado de España 2021, 57). Rodriguez responded,

> In reality, 500 million euros are a pittance to continue fighting against violence…. because all the Euros that we can invest in this are not enough as long

> as there is still a woman who suffers violence in this country. And with great pride I say that…[our ministry/programs] are not chiringuitos; we save lives. (Senado de España 2021, 63).

Victim contests as a rhetorical strategy: Why women?

The "rhetoric of victimization" (Quincy 1972, 315) constructs victims by explaining to an audience (e.g., the public) what injustices face a victim group. Injustice frames challenge status quo oppressions by bringing them to light, by seeking recognition for groups, and by suggesting related policy measures (Gamson 2013). Injustice framing is a political act, and it becomes competitive when many groups claim injustices and seek state resources to help victims. In the "public problems marketplace," victim contests occur when "antagonistic parties" dispute victimhood by offering counter-framings that deny a public problem or source of inequality (Berbrier and Pruett 2006, 262; Benford and Hunt 2003), suggest alternative victims and/or victimizers, and/or wage claims for the "real or biggest victims" in need of policy responses (Kenney and Clairemont 2009, 292). I argue that Vox uses victim contests as a rhetorical strategy to claim equal dignity for all victims of violence in an attempt to disparage feminism. This rhetorical strategy can lead to the defunding or even elimination of GEMs.

Vox most famously uses the phrase "violence has no gender" to dispute women as *the* victims in interpersonal relationships. Vox claims that feminism wrongly identifies patriarchy as the source of violence, which has the effect of relegating women to the status of victimhood and accusing men of being perpetrators who harm women. Vox instead constructs men as potential victims of interpersonal violence and also as victims of feminist narratives that unjustly cast them as victimizers. Dislodging women as the victims of patriarchy allows for a counter-framing of alternative victims; any person in a family can experience what Vox calls intrafamilial violence, including children, elders, men, and homosexual partners. The rhetoric of victim contests has even applied to mortal victims of COVID-19. Both regional and municipal Vox officials refused to celebrate International Women's Day in 2021 by stressing that, at that point in the year, 120,000 Spaniards had lost their lives to COVID-19, and only 50 women had died due to gender violence. That same year the leader of the national party, Santiago Abascal, requested that the Congress of Deputies declare March 8 the International Day of Coronavirus Victims instead of what has historically been known as International Women's Day. As such, Vox was asserting that COVID-19 victims were the "biggest" victims at that time. The rhetorical strategy of victim contests arguably holds great persuasive potential for Vox. Whereas Vox claims to be recognizing numerous victims, including women victims as well as beloved children and grandparents, it can also assert that feminists are unfair for focusing solely on women and creating victims out of innocent men.

Vox's canceling of the word gender in relation to violence, nevertheless, disregards the experiences of women who are victims. The cases of two women killed in Madrid in 2023 demonstrate the party's rigid quest to never speak of masculine violence against women. When a 36-year-old woman was killed in July 2023, all

political groups in the Madrid city council except Vox publicly observed a moment of silence with signs stating, "'Enough is enough! No to gender violence." A Vox councilor instead held a sign nearby that said "Vox with all victims of violence." Vox used the same slogan on a sign when a 35-year-old woman was killed in September 2023. This time, Vox defended its sign by stating that "all people have the same dignity" and that the city council's sign expressed "hatred of men" (Fiter 2023). The PP mayor's response to the first case is illustrative. He urged that "Vox's speech is not appropriate, it is wrong…all parties [need to] send an unequivocal message… of forcefulness, firmness and unity" against gender violence (Soler 2023). In short, Vox rhetoric and actions not only demonstrate callousness to the two victims who lost their lives but they also loosen perceptions of societal and government resolve against gender violence.

Evidence from the city of El Ejido and the region Castilla-La Mancha shows how canceling gender and preferring alternative victims reduces policy responses and jeopardizes GEMs. The city of El Eijdo, governed in coalition by PP and Vox, in 2019, decided to exit the *Sistema VioGén* program, which is a national program that provides computer software for law enforcement assessments of risks and responses to gender violence. Moreover, in 2020, the Vox councilperson in charge of equality in El Ejido rejected available funding for gender violence from the Andalusian Women's Institute that could have been used to hire professionals attending to victims of gender violence. What is more, El Ejido did not commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (November 25) or International Women's Day (March 8), but the city did provide extra resources to centers for elderly persons, and it organized a week-long celebration of the city's elderly population. Due to its preference for alternative victims, Vox in the region Castilla-La Mancha has argued for the elimination of the regional GEMs. In November 2023, Vox claimed that the regional Women's Institute and Equality Department accomplishes very little and that its expenditures should "really [be] dedicated to those who need it, which are the people who suffer this [intrafamilial] violence, whether they are women, the elderly, or children" (ABC 2023). Once again, Vox's rhetoric cleverly includes women even as it shifts focus away from them, denies a policy problem, and seeks to dismantle existing policies and institutions.

Conclusion

This research note shows that the far-right in Spain creates antagonism surrounding GEMS within the national legislature, subnational administrations, and the media. Although it can be argued that far-right rhetoric is an emotive outlet for those who have "cultural anxiety" about gender and is thus somewhat overblown (Dietze and Roth 2020, 16), this note establishes that rhetorical attacks have real power to define GEMs as inappropriate and unnecessary, thereby moving ideas that once appeared to be too far-right into the mainstream. That is, mainstream left and right parties in Spain had supported GEMs for several decades and eliminating GEMs seemed highly unlikely before Vox began demanding an end to *chiringuitos de género*. Institutional threats to GEMs were realized as rhetorical strategies like ideographs and

victim contests proved convincing to additional political actors and the public and the consensus regarding GEMs was broken. Given that the far-right and its anti-gender campaigns constitute a global phenomenon (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018), scholars should continue to examine how far-right political parties in other country cases use rhetoric to attack GEMs, and, in doing so, stand in the way of improving and saving women's lives.

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ROUNDTABLE

Women's policy machineries and representation in the USA: toward filling empirical gaps

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Abstract

The US federal bureaucracy contains 7 women's policy machineries: The White House Gender Policy Council, the Center for Women Veterans, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, the Office of Global Women's Issues at the Department of State, the Office on Women's Health at the Department of Health and Human Services, the Office on Violence Against Women at the Department of Justice, and the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor. Together these offices provide a broad, shared commitment to advancing women's interests, but they vary greatly in terms of their missions, activities, constituencies served, organizational structure, forms of authorization, and levels of collaboration with political actors inside and outside of government. Recognizing the variation in American women's policy machineries, this paper provides a proposed empirical framework for how scholars can begin to document the variation in American WPMs and analyze how effectively each WPM implements gender equality policies and empowers American women. The first section defines WPMs. The second section proposes the research question, data sources, and methods for a future study of American WPMs. The conclusion discusses the implications adding this proposed study to the broader comparative literature on WPMs.

Keywords Women's policy machineries · USA · Gender equality policy · Bureaucracy · Representation

Introduction

On March 8, 2021, President Biden issued an executive order establishing the White House Gender Policy Council to "ensure that the Federal Government is working to advance equal rights and opportunity, regardless of gender or gender identity in advancing domestic and foreign policy" (Biden 2021). With this executive order,

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the White House Gender Policy Council joins the Center for Women Veterans, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, the Office of Global Women's Issues, the Office on Women's Health, the Office on Violence Against Women, and the Women's Bureau, among others, as a part of the US women's policy machinery (WPM). Together these offices provide a broad, shared commitment to advancing women's interests, but they vary greatly in terms of their missions, activities, constituencies served, organizational structure, forms of authorization, and levels of collaboration with political actors inside and outside of government. With a history of federalism and fragmented women's advocacy movements, the US WPM has developed in silos, scattered, with no central authority and for the most part no permanent mandate. Little scholarship exists documenting the variation in American WPMs and how this variation might impact the effectiveness with which each effectively implements gender equality policies and enhances women's representation and voice in a way that speaks to the diversity of American women's interests in gendered public policies (Keiser et al. 2002; Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003; Engeli and Mazur 2018). This contribution to the roundtable presents a detailed research design for filling this gap using previous comparative research on WPMs to develop the framework, questions, and measurements used in the proposed study. The first section defines WPMs. The second section proposes the research question, data sources, and methods for a future study of American WPMs. The conclusion discusses the implications adding this proposed study to the broader comparative literature on WPMs.

What are women's policy machineries and why do they matter?

Women's policy machineries are government-established structures that allow women and their advocates to work full-time within the government to design and implement policies devoted to improving women's status (Stetson and Mazur 1995). Typically, they are bureaucratic offices or agencies that have formal missions related to improving women's status or rights, formulating policies related to "women's issues," or applying a gendered lens to mainstream public policies (Mazur 2001). Given their formal missions focused on women's policy interests, WPMs impact public policy in two ways. First, they allow femocrats (bureaucrats working within women's policy agencies) to formulate (or re-formulate) policies that advance women's interests by participating in formal decision-making processes and/or reframing debates in feminist terms (Stetson and Mazur 1995; Lovenduski 2005). For example, femocrats may use their positions within government agencies to challenge sexism by pushing for gender equity in employment, an end to sexual harassment or abuse, or policies that better recognize women's everyday needs (Katzenstein 1998). Second, women's policy agencies provide women's organizations operating outside of the state with access to policymakers and an opportunity to exert their influence on the policymaking process. Often, those organizations receive access because WPMs recruit women's movement leaders into policy networks, form alliances with them, provide funds for women's organizations, and/or invite women's organizations

leaders to testify or otherwise share information with agencies about women's policy interests (Stetson and Mazur 1995).

In the USA, I argue that WPMs have the potential to provide women with two forms of representation and policy advocacy that could help them compensate for the fact the women are chronically underrepresented in other branches of the US government. To date, women have never held more than 27.1% of the seats in the US Congress, never held the presidency, and only held 4 seats on the Supreme Court (Center for American Women and Politics 2022). However, women have served in the bureaucracy in larger numbers. As of FY 2017, women held 33.9% of Senior Executive Service positions (US Office of Personnel Management 2018).[1]

Because the 7 US WPMs focus explicitly on advancing women's policy interests, I also argue that they represent American women in two ways*: passively* or *actively*. They *passively represent* women when they employ women (including women from diverse backgrounds) as leaders and/or machinery staffers (Banaszak 2010; Nachimas and Rosenbloom 1973; Pitkin 1967). Because bureaucracies are hierarchical, I argue WPMs should be particularly likely to passively represent women because they will be disproportionately likely to employ women in influential leadership positions (Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003; Riccuci and Saidel 1997; Siegelman 2003[1976]).

WPMs should *actively represent* women when their staffers have the authorization and authority they need to advocate for "their constituents [women's] interests" and they can "make policy decisions that benefit a given group among they agency's clientele" (Keiser et al. 2002, 553; Pitkin 1967). Public administration scholars have found that active/substantial representation is more likely to occur when agency staffers share demographic characteristics with their constituents or clientele (Bradbury and Kellough 2007; Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003; Hale and Branch 2003 [1992]; Lim 2006; Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006; Meier and Nigro 1976; Selden, Brudney, and Kellough 2003[1998]; Riccuci et al. 2004; Roch, Pitts, and Navarro 2020; Thompson 2003 [1976]; Watkins-Hayes 2009; Wilkins 2006). Because I expect WPMs will employ larger numbers of women at all levels and they are officially authorized to address women's policy needs, I also expect they should actively represent women's policy interests.

Lastly, building on the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Program's framework for assessing gender equity policies, I argue WPMs' effectiveness will be a function of their actual policy outputs and the degree to which they empower women's organizations and advocates working outside of the state.

[1] The Senior Executive Service (SES) was established by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and members of the SES are primarily employed in managerial, supervisory, and policy positions in the executive branch. They often serve directly below top-level presidential appointees (US Office of Personnel and Management 2012).

Research questions, data, and methods

A descriptive understanding of US WPMs is needed to inform future analyses of their effectiveness and ability to represent the diversity of American women's interests. Thus, I propose collecting descriptive data to answer four questions about the current American WPMs.

Question 1: what WPMs exist within the US federal bureaucracy and what do they do? (Description of current structures for all policy machineries)

First, I propose documenting the extent and form of current US federal gender machinery by building on the state feminism research of Dorothy McBride, Amy Mazur and the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS). Recognizing that the presence and missions of WPMs has varied over time, often shifting along with partisan or ideological shifts in the presidential administration (Chappell 2002; Kantola and Outshoorn 2007; Stetson 2007), I first plan to identify and describe all of the women's policy agencies that currently exist within the federal government. To date, Table 1 shows that I have identified 7 WPMs in the USA.

Ideally, I aim to provide a more complete description of WPMs' work by collecting information on the factors that might impact their effectiveness: their mission, activities, budget, forms of collaboration, forms of authorization, and political power. To begin to describe the impact these machineries have on gender equity policies, I attempted to start this project by collecting basic information on the 7 extant WPMs' missions and policy activities. Table 2 provides an overview of those efforts, revealing that it is extremely difficult to collect information on WPMs in the USA. Archival records are idiosyncratically shared, dated, sparse, and/or inaccessible to the public. Without accessible information on agency staffing, it is also difficult to identify and recruit femocrats for interviews without help from agency or Washington, DC-insiders.

For the mapping phase of this proposed project, I planned on collecting information on WPM's that were active during the Biden administration, hoping that those agencies would have a great deal of information available publicly on their websites. In reality, only the Office on Violence Against Women and the Women's Bureau provided fairly comprehensive records of their work online. Thus, it appears a systematic comparison of all 7 WPMs recent work, may be difficult if not impossible, raising questions about whether and how to select case studies for deeper analysis instead. Ideally, I would use information about which of these agencies look like they have the best/worst prospects for success on paper, given the information listed in Table 2, but it appears I may have to rely on convenience/accessibility-based approach instead. Unfortunately, such an approach will limit my ability to describe current best and worst practices among existing WPMs. The data challenges I have encountered also suggest it may be quite challenging to examine WPMs activities and effectiveness in different political and

Table 1 An Overview of US women's policy machineries

Machinery	Established	Authorization	Mission
Center for Women Veterans (Veteran's Affairs)	1994	PL 103–446	To monitor and coordinate VA's administration of health care and benefits services, and programs for women Veterans; To serve as an advocate for a cultural transformation (both within VA and in the general public) in recognizing the service and contributions of women Veterans and women in the military; To raise awareness of the responsibility to treat women Veterans with dignity and respect
Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (Defense)	1951	Sec. of Defense; Federal Advisory Committee Act; renewed biennially	To provide advice and recommendations on matters and policies relating to the recruitment, retention, employment, integration, well-being, and treatment of servicewomen in the Armed Forces
Gender Policy Council	2021	EO 14020	Advance gender equity and equality in both domestic and foreign policy development and implementation
Office of Global Women's Issues (State)	2009	?	The Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI) has a mandate to promote the rights and empowerment of women and girls through U.S. foreign policy
Office for Women's Health (Health and Human Services)	1991	No statutory authority	Provide national leadership and coordination to improve the health of women and girls through policy, education, and innovative programs
Office on Violence Against Women (Justice)	1994	Violence Against Women Act	Provides federal leadership in developing the national capacity to reduce violence against women and administer justice for and strengthen services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking
Women's Bureau (Labor)	1920	PL 259	Develops policies and standards and conducts inquiries to safeguard the interests of working women; to advocate for their equality and economic security for themselves and their families; and to promote quality work environments

Table 2 Women's policy machinery mapping data collection list

Information needed	Available data	Data challenges
Machinery mission statements	Policy machinery websites; collect current mission but be aware	Missions may have shifted over time; older statements may not be consistently available for all WPMs
Machinery authorizations	Text of laws, executive orders, or other government actions that created the machinery	
Members of leadership teams	Policy machinery websites and nominations hearings (if applicable); collect official biographies; pay special attention to names, numbers of leaders, prior experience/women's movement connections, partisanship/ideology	WPM websites very idiosyncratic about whether and how they present this information
Staff	Policy machinery websites; budget documents; pay special attention to how many full-time paid staff; location (DC or field offices)	Information on staff beyond the top leadership positions has been difficult or impossible to find in budgets, Office of Personnel and Management data. Unclear if this information would be available through Freedom of Information Act requests. It is not yet available through National Archives records Little public information about staffing also makes it difficult to identify potential femocrats to interview without inside connections
Machinery budgets	Congressional appropriations bills and/or hearings; budgets listed on agency websites; collect both budget requests and actual appropriations to see where there might be gaps in agency resources; Library of Congress and National Archives records	Information on budgets has been difficult or impossible to find
Location within the bureaucracy	USA.gov; machinery/department websites; location (White House, cabinet-level department, independent agency, etc.?) and how closely connected they are to leaders (i.e. How close are leaders to cabinet secretaries and/or the president?)	Departments and agencies may reorganize over time

Table 2 (continued)

Information needed	Available data	Data challenges
Current primary activities	Current programs, policies, initiatives, etc.; machinery websites; congressional oversight hearings; CRS Reports; national media reports; National Archives records	WPM websites very idiosyncratic about whether and how they present this information. Some (e.g. the Women's Bureau, Office on Violence Against Women) provide good information about their activities; others provide little to no information on their work (e.g. The Gender Policy Council and the Office on Global Women's Issues). Information on these agencies from congressional hearings is scarce The National Archives does not have scheduled disclosures of records for the Center for Women Veterans, DACOWITS, the Office on Women's Health, the Office on Global Women's Issues, the Office on Violence Against Women, Data are available for the Women's Bureau, but many files are inactive or date to the 1960s. (https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/rcs/schedules/index.html?dir=/departments) Archival data on the current Gender Policy Council is unavailable. Data on the similar WPMs in the Obama and Clinton administrations is available at the Obama and Clinton libraries, but it is unclear how complete those records are and how many of those records are publicly available. Obama records are still being processed Identifying interview participants without staffing information is challenging
Connections to the women's movement	Biographies of leaders/staffers; media accounts; reports; hearings transcripts; interviews with machinery and women's organizations' staffers	Identifying interview participants without staffing information is challenging

historical contexts. Most notably, it may be hard to compare their activities under recent Democratic and Republican presidential administrations.

Question 2: to what extent do American WPMs passively represent American women during the policymaking process? (Description of staff and structure for all policy machineries)

To answer this question, I planned to collect information on women's passive representation. More specifically I aimed to collect the data listed below on the employees in each women's policy agency, but I once again encountered significant challenges. Often, I was only able to find complete information on the gender of each WPM's leader. In some cases, detailed biographies provided additional information about the leader's race, ethnicity, or nationality, and/or their prior connections to or experience with the women's movement. Those data were not available consistently.

Ideally, I would also collect or calculate the following data on each WMP's staff, but I have not been able to find public records that provide:

- Percentage of women on the machinery's leadership team (it is not always clear how big the leadership team is and leaders below the agency head are often not listed)
- Percentage of each machinery's full-time staff that are women and women of color (complete staff numbers are not publicly available)
- Percentage of each machinery's part-time staff that are women and women of color (complete staff numbers are not publicly available)
- Percentage of women and women of color at each general schedule level in each machinery (complete staff numbers are not publicly available)
- Percentage of women and women of color employed in Washington, DC in each machinery (for machineries that may have offices outside of Washington)
- Average tenure, turnover, and retention rates for women employed in each machinery
- Number of women with formal connections (e.g. past employment) with women's organizations employed in each machinery (biographies are inconsistently available and tend to only be provided for 1–3 of the top leaders in an agency)
- Number of staffers/leaders in each agency with education or training related to gender analysis (e.g. degrees/certificates in Women's or Gender Studies) (biographies are inconsistently available and tend to only be provided for 1–3 of the top leaders in an agency)

Question 3: to what extent do American WPMs actively represent American women by effectively promoting gender equality policies and empowering women's advocates outside of the state? (description of past action, possibly based on case studies of a smaller number of machineries)

After I complete some initial mapping related to WPM's current structure and activities, I hope to analyze the effectiveness of WPMs based on their policy outputs and

their success in terms of actively representing women's policy needs as they were articulated by women's organizations and advocates. To answer this question, I plan to follow the Gender Equality Policies in Practice (GEPP) approach to analyzing the impacts of gender equality policies (Mazur 2017; Annesley et al. 2015). Thus, I will collect data on women's organizations' direct participation in the policy implementation process and whether the content in implementation tools and instruments reflect the framing and proposals that women's organizations used during policy debates. Once I collect those data, I will use the GEPP framework to both count and categorize the machinery's policy outputs based on the degree to which they shifted gender norms, resources, and power toward gender equality. GEPP's framework posits that policy outputs can be placed in four categories based on the degree to which they transform gender relations.

First, policy outputs are considered ***gender-neutral*** when they have "failed in transforming gender relations" or not "even attempted to do so," often because few resources (i.e. sufficient staff and budgets) were devoted to the policy's implementation (Engeli and Mazur 2018, 121). For example, each year the Democratic party hosts Equal Pay Day events, which are designed to highlight "how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned the previous year" (National Committee on Pay Equity 2022). These events are often largely symbolic. They draw attention to the issue, often with the help of high-profile activists (e.g. Megan Rapinoe and other players US women's soccer team), but they do little to make much needed changes in the enforcement and implementation of American equal pay policies (Bieler and Boren 2021; English 2021). Instead, they simply call attention to legislation, such as the Paycheck Fairness Act, which has been stalled in Congress for decades (English and Niezgoda 2020). Consequently, gender-neutral policy outcomes maintain traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

Second, policy outputs are coded as a form of ***gender rowback*** when they actually work against the aims of gender equality. For example, under the George W. Bush administration, the Office on Women's Health and the Office on Violence against Women both had to avoid issues related to reproductive rights and emergency contraception to meet the administration's conservative policy goals (Stetson 2007).

Third, policy outputs produce ***gender accommodation*** when they have tangible effects, but they have "mostly targeted accommodating or compensating traditional gender relations rather than transforming them," often because they continue to distribute benefits based on men's and women's roles in traditional gender roles and/or opposite sex marriages (Engeli and Mazur 2018, 122). In the area of equal pay, policies that provide resources for pay negotiation trainings for women, rather than addressing discrimination that results from gender norms about women's assertiveness, are an example of gender accommodation.

Lastly, true ***gender transformation*** occurs when policy outputs break down traditional gender roles, norms, and binaries so that men and women are on more equal footing (Engeli and Mazur 2018). True gender transformation also requires evidence that a diverse array of women and women's organizations were substantively included in the process (Engeli and Mazur 2018). Thus, final policy outputs should contain language and frames that reflect women's organizations' desired outputs and the diversity of women's experiences. In simple terms, this means there should be

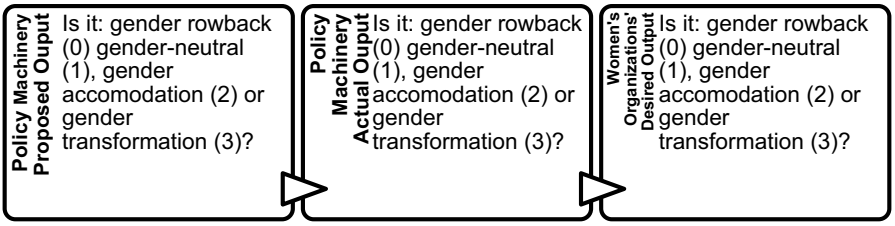

Fig. 1 Proposed coding and analysis framework

alignment between how women's organizations' and policy machineries discussed a given policy proposal, and clear references and acknowledgements of women's intersectional identities in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and/or socioeconomic status. Transformation may be partial or complete, and Engeli and Mazur (2018) expect complete transformations to be relatively rare given the large-scale shifts in policy and public opinion that they require.

To evaluate WPMs' impact on gender transformation I plan to collect four types of data. First, relying on archival documents and/or interviews with femocrats, I plan to ***identify and describe the agency's major policy initiatives*** under the most recent Democratic and Republican administrations. Second, I will code ***each machinery's proposed and actual policy outputs*** using the GEPP framework to determine whether gender transformation was the goal and whether or not that transformation manifested in the final policy. Third, to determine whether a diverse array of women's organizations and advocates were included in the process, I will develop a ***sample of women's organizations'*** using existing directories of women's organizations and ***collect information from their websites about their preferred policy initiatives and outcomes***.[2] Fourth, to supplement our archival data I plan to conduct interviews with WPM staffers and women's organizations' staffers about their proposed policy outputs, their perceptions of the impact of those policy outputs, and their perceptions of women's organizations' inclusion and empowerment throughout the process. I expect interviews will be particularly important for describing and evaluating each machinery's strategic decision-making process and perceptions of the degree to which women's organizations and advocates were included in the machinery's work.

Once I collect the archival data and the interview transcripts, I plan to rely on qualitative coding and automated text analysis to achieve two goals. First, using the GEPP framework as a guide, I will develop a qualitative coding scheme and/or a text analysis dictionary I can use to analyze the alignment between the machineries' proposed and actual outcomes and women's organizations' desired outcomes as shown in Fig. 1 below. Based on this categorization scheme, I will then use a 4-point scale

[2] The size and scope of this sample is to be determined based on existing time and resources. I plan to prioritize including large nationally representative women's organizations and a selection of intersectional women's organizations that represent women based their gender and/or their race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability status, and/or socioeconomic status.

Table 3 Gender transformation scoring framework

Aggregate score	Type of gender transformation
0	Gender rowback
1–3	Gender neutral
4–6	Gender accommodation
7–9	Gender transformation

to assign points to each output based on the degree to which it moved policy toward gender transformation (gender rowback = 0, gender-neutral = 1, gender accommodation = 2, gender transformation = 3).

By taking the aggregate score across all 3 categories, I will then create a summary measure for how much each machinery policy output transformed policy. Table 3 provides a framework for how I will assess those scores.

I acknowledge that reducing the complex concept of gender transformation to numerical scores will lose some of the nuance in the concept. However, I plan to operationalize and analyze gender transformation in this way because it will allow me to create comparable measures of policy success across different WPMs. For example, using this scheme, I could create an agency transformation score by averaging the policy transformation scores for each of their policy outputs. Such a measure would provide scholars and practitioners with simple, quantifiable data they could use to map gender transformation throughout the federal bureaucracy. It would also allow scholars and practitioners to identify high- and low-performing WPMs that could be studied further for a more nuanced understanding how they do or do not promote transformative gender policies.

Because the scope of the analysis for this third descriptive research question is so large and data accessibility issues are so severe, I will likely need to limit my analyses to specific cases using the data I collected on each machinery's structure and degree of passive representation and/or the agencies where I can gain access to femocrats to interview.

Implications and impact

The proposed study will contribute to our understanding of US WPMs and femocratic structures, for which little scholarship exists. On the academic side, this study would allow gender and politics, public administration, representation, and social movement scholars to understand the contributions that WPMs make to both women's representation and the American policymaking process. On the practitioner side, this study would be instrumental in helping women's organizations and policy advocates identify WPM partners and develop strategies for how to work with and support the development of robust and successful WMPs. However, overcoming significant data accessibility challenges will be a crucial first step in beginning to demonstrate the influence and impact American WPMS have on gender equality policies.

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