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Gender Equality Policy and Universities: Feminist Strategic Alliances to Re-gender the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Reforming the gender-blind higher education curriculum is a crucial intervention for an effective implementation of gender mainstreaming across policy areas. This article examines the policy innovation adopted in Catalonia wherein quality assurance processes have been re-gendered and incentives to engage the professoriate in gender curricular reforms have been introduced. In doing so, it unveils the opportunity structures and institutional settings shaping the micro-political strategies deployed by the feminist strategic alliances that have stirred such policy changes and discuss their potential transferability to other contexts. The article also pinpoints the relevance of a feminist reappropriation of evaluation processes.

Introduction

Mainstreaming gender in higher education constitutes a textbook case of policy failure due to the non-fulfillment of the expected outcomes set out by international and national regulatory frameworks and to ongoing opposition (FESTA 2016). Personnel policy, curricular planning, or quality assurance conceptual frameworks rest upon representations of genderless teachers, managers, and learners and upon an ethos of presumed objectivity and merit-informed decisions (Benschop and Brouns 2003). Like in other policy fields, adherence to preexisting practices and assumptions of what constitutes legitimate activity yields indifference to gendered policy problems and a reinterpretation of gender equality policies (Benschop and Verloo 2006). As a result, policy failures affecting the implementation of gender equality measures in universities are unlikely to be overcome through isolated efforts at each institution. Building feminist strategic alliances may thus be needed not just in the agenda-setting, formulation, and adoption phases but also in the implementation and evaluation stages, with post-adoption remaining largely under-researched in feminist policy studies (Bustelo 2017; Mazur 2017).

This article examines the actions undertaken by feminist strategic alliances set up in Catalonia to implement the legislative gender mandates in the university policy sector, particularly in the sub-field of curricular reforms. Despite being the most neglected of the interventions tackling gender (in) equality in higher education, engendering the curriculum is a major feminist issue with strong implications for both universities and society at large. How can legislation, policies, and programs effectively mainstream a gender equality perspective "in all policies at all levels and at all stages" (Council of Europe 1998, 15) if higher education institutions continue to provide gender-blind knowledge, skills, and competences to students? Unawareness about how gender inequalities are (re)produced will inevitably lead students to become gender-blind doctors, judges, teachers, engineers, and policymakers, to name a few occupations.

Given that male-dominated arenas determine what kind of "literal and figurative space" is provided to feminist activists (Roth 2006, 169), this article examines the opportunity structures and institutional settings shaping the micro-political strategies used by feminist strategic alliances when operating at the

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margins (Holli 2008). Attention is also paid to the ways in which feminist activists have managed to shape the prevailing political opportunity structure through formal and informal engagement with institutions (Chappell 2000). More specifically, drawing on process tracing and participant observation, I investigate how feminist academics and, particularly, the directors of universities' equality units pushed for system-level change in the post-adoption phase in order to counteract soft normative development, lax oversight mechanisms, and continued resistance to gender curricular reforms. The main outputs of such a feminist driven change include the mainstreaming of gender into the quality assurance process university degrees must go through, the production of gender-sensitive teaching guides, and the establishment of institutional incentives to engage the professoriate in gender curricular forms.

The results of the empirical analysis suggest that feminist actors are more likely to influence the policy process if they seek the involvement of mainstream organizations and institutional arenas at the implementation and evaluation stages. The article also underscores that carving out a space for feminist interventions in these phases requires engaging with the dominant discourses of the policy sub-system, which in the case of higher education entails a feminist reappropration of quality assurance conceptual frameworks. In this vein, the findings of the article align with those studies pinpointing that political opportunities do not just "hang in there;" rather, new openings can also be created by feminist actors through concerted efforts.

Feminist strategic alliances to stir gender reforms

Comparative analyses have found that the success of feminist actors in the agenda-setting, problem definition, and adoption phases is shaped by the characteristics of the policy environment, that is, the political opportunity structure. These studies have concluded that gender equality entrepreneurs are more likely to succeed when the left is in power, state structures for women's policy act as insiders in the policy-making process, the issue has a high priority on the women's movement agenda, a strong counter-movement is absent, and the country's cultural attitudes about gender equality accompany the reform (McBride Stetson 2001; Outshoorn 2004). The particular dynamics of the policy sub-system in question (main actors, instruments used to make policies, and arenas where policy discussion and decisions take place) also determine the influence of feminist agency (Mazur 2002). Positive impacts are more likely to occur when no single actor controls the policy area, rules are either loose or closely defined but evolving, and feminist demands match or are compatible with the belief system of the policy sector (Lovenduski et al. 2005).

The issue of whether these patterns of causation are found in the post-adoption stages remains an open-ended question (Mazur 2017). This is particularly relevant because adoption and implementation systems may be substantially different from each other. Furthermore, the relationship between feminist activists and political institutions is not deterministic but interactive and dynamic, so "in choosing certain strategies over others, they help shape the very nature of the political opportunity structure" (Chappell 2000, 269). Also, in federal and decentralized polities, feminists may turn the political opportunity structure to their advantage, transferring their activism across institutional arenas when blockage is faced at either level (see, among others, Haussman, Sawer, and Vickers 2010).

In disentangling the factors that underpin the contentious process of implementation, recent research has drawn attention to resistance – i.e. opposition to the change that the implementation of a policy promotes – as a meta factor hindering the success of feminist policy across the policy cycle (Lombardo and Mergaert 2013). Specifically, the non-convergence between the beliefs of the implementers and the core idea of a policy hampers its implementation, particularly when the targets of change are the very same organizational subcultures. Indeed, implementers often "remember the old" and "forget the new" to suit their own ends (Mackay 2014). Passive resistance, expressed through non-actions and non-decisions, discontinues the validation of the policy through cumulative actions, which is facilitated by lax institutional oversight and by the absence of insider allies from within the policy sector (Waylen 2014). Also, more active forms of resistance such as the reintroduction of old

assumptions or the evaporation of the aims, scope, or institutional arrangements of a policy critically impair implementation work (see Verge and Lombardo 2019).

Policy failures can trigger the policy learning of gender equality actors and foster the creation of a coalition aimed at reformulating the policy to enhance its effectiveness through concerted lobby activities, the production of reports that expose non-compliant behavior and challenge rationalizations for resistance, and discursive turns that re-politicize the problem and re-legitimize the policy's core ideas and instruments (Verge and Lombardo 2019). Several concepts have been used to describe the feminist coordination that seeks to affect the policy process, such as "strategic partnerships" (Halsaa 1998), "triangles of empowerment" (Vargas and Wieringa 1998), "feminist advocacy coalitions" (Mazur 2002), or "velvet triangles" (Woodward 2003). Even if these feminist co-operative constellations are usually located in the margins of institutional male power (Holli 2008), coordinated agency may compensate for the lack of attention and influence encountered in the political and policy process.

Although the conceptualizations of these constellations are often used interchangeably, notable differences underpin their nature, ranging from informal personal networks for communication exchange to coalitions aimed at achieving policy goals (Holli 2008). Most players have been considered to be "female in a predominantly male environment" (Woodward 2003, 84), typically women politicians, femocrats, and the women's movement. Nonetheless, rather than being predefined, the composition of these networks should be empirically proven, which may allow identifying male allies as well as mainstream organizations and institutional arenas as sites where feminist alliances might be crafted (Holli 2008; see also Childs and Krook 2009). This is crucial since the effectiveness of feminist policy is very much dependent on broadening the number of actors who are on board. As a matter of fact, non-feminist allies have been found to be key in supporting policy demands at both the formulation and implementation stages (Mazur 2002). Likewise, repeated interactions between mainstream actors of a policy sub-system and feminist actors yields an accumulated effect on the former's belief system, easing their acceptance of feminist definitions of the problem and its solution (Abrar, Lovenduski, and Margetts 2000).

Further research is also needed as regards the participation of feminist academics and gender experts in these alliances, who have been conceived of as either constitutive elements, that is, an integral corner of the feminist triangle, or as outside helpers (Holli 2008). This is extremely important when the policy field being challenged is the very same academia. Hitherto, feminist academics remain heavily understudied as a change actor, especially those who engage with academic institutions to transform them. Yet, feminist academics have never remained within the contours of the "ivory tower," engaging in consultancy and advisory roles, knowledge dissemination, and seeking to influence the actors directly involved in politics and policymaking (Childs and Dahlerup 2018, 186). Research groups on women, feminism, and gender equality were the main producers of knowledge and awareness-raising on discrimination against women in universities up to the establishment of equality units within higher education institutions.

Although these units are the key instrument through which an increasing number of universities pursue gender equality objectives (Pastor et al. 2015), they have received little scholarly attention. Most of these university-level "women's machineries" are led by feminist scholars who combine their role as researchers and instructors with a temporary appointed position as "femocrats" in their workplace. These actors can be regarded as "outsiders within" (Hill Collins 1986), since they find themselves in marginal locations, experience partial acceptance by the institutions they inhabit, and may only be conferred "nominal legitimacy without thorough institutional commitments to a feminist agenda" (Roth 2006, 161). However, their oppositional knowledge of often hidden, non-written institutional gendered logics and taken-for-granted practices is crucial to prevent the feminist agenda from evaporating (Benschop and Verloo 2006).

Methodology

To explore the causal "what" and the causal "how" (cf. Vennesson 2008) of the policy changes affecting gender curricular reforms in Catalonia, the empirical analysis applies process tracing.

The sources of information are threefold. Firstly, to identify the main changes introduced I examine the relevant policy documents of the formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation phases, including the Spanish and Catalan normative frameworks, the subsequent quality assurance guidelines, and the documents produced collectively by feminist actors. Secondly, to assess the interactive relationship between feminist activists and political institutions, I have conducted eleven interviews with some of the feminist actors that participated in the strategic alliances under examination, including women members of parliament (MPs), activists from the women's movement, and directors of universities' equality units.[1] Thirdly, an ethnographic approach based on my situated position and participant observation in the policy process studied here has enabled me to grasp "how are things done" in gendered institutions (Lowndes 2014) and to identify spaces to deploy feminist agency (Hertzog 2011). Becoming the director of the equality unit of my university in 2014 afforded me the opportunity to interact on a regular basis with governmental officials in charge of equality and university policies in several forums and to coalesce with the directors of the equality units of other universities, especially with those pertaining to Catalan-speaking universities. Also, I was invited by the Catalan quality assurance agency to participate in the production of guidelines on how to mainstream gender into university teaching.

The empirical analysis provides a "thick description" of the context in which the policy innovation occurred and of the opportunity structure and institutional sites feminist strategic alliances turned to their advantage. Before moving to the empirical analysis, the remainder of this section briefly describes the universe of governmental and semi-public directives and actors that inhabit this policy sub-system. It should be noted that higher education "policy-making and implementation systems are different from each other" and that this policy is both country specific and sub-sector specific, with governance arrangements, reforms of the curriculum, and student financing being underpinned by "different power and value terrains" (Kogan 2005, 62). With regards to the legal framework, higher education policy in Spain is a shared prerogative of the central and the regional levels. Universities have the autonomy to establish their own programs and curricula, but there is an obligatory post hoc accreditation of degrees by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), a process which in some parts of the country has been devolved to an equivalent regional agency, like in Catalonia.

Cultural norms about gender are slightly more progressive in Catalonia than in the rest of Spain (Tormos 2020) and this region has pioneered the introduction of several gender mainstreaming policy instruments countrywide (Alonso 2015). Yet, the success of the gender reforms under examination, as will be discussed in the empirical analysis, can be largely attributed to the existence of various institutional arenas for inter-university cooperation opened to the participation of gender equality actors. Whereas the countrywide University Coordination Council is integrated exclusively by the rectors of Spanish universities and regional education ministers, the Inter-University Council of Catalonia is structured around sectoral committees, each of which includes key stakeholders (government officials, semi-public agencies, and university representatives). One of such committees is the Women and Science Committee wherein universities are represented by the directors of their equality units. Other institutional settings include the Vives University Network (Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, XVU), a nonprofit organization that coordinates joint actions for Catalan-speaking universities, predominantly from Catalonia and the Valencian Community, and the Spanish Universities Rectors' Conference (Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas, CRUE). While the former established a gender equality working group in 2013, it was not until 2019 that the latter appointed a delegate for gender equality to maintain dialogue with (Spanish) government officials of this policy sector.

Resistance to gender curricular reforms: doing it ourselves

Higher education institutions are riddled with numerous biases and discriminations against women in terms of access and promotion, devaluation of their work, family-unfriendly arrangements, gender pay gap, and sexual harassment (see, among others, Mason and Goulden 2004; Valian 2005). Universities are also underpinned by the adoption of a masculine point of view as neutral and universal, namely androcentrism, which has profound implications on both the reproduction of knowledge and on what counts as legitimate knowledge (Minnich 1990). The contributions made by Women's and Gender Studies are still widely unacknowledged by many mainstream scholars (Dahlerup 2010; Grünberg 2011) and the supply of gender-specific – typically elective – courses is very low (Cassese, Bos, and Duncan 2012; Foster et al. 2013). Concerning the curriculum, gender-blindness is widespread and opposition to reform abounds (Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González 2018). Resistance has manifested itself implicitly or passively in the form of non-actions as well as explicitly or actively through direct opposition.

At the supra-national level, efforts to mainstream gender in research and innovation content find no parallel in the case of the curriculum. European Union (EU) interventions on higher education have mainly concentrated on the gender gap in academic careers (European Commission 2019). The creation of the European Higher Education Area in 2010 mandated the inclusion of Women's and Gender Studies in the reorganization of undergraduate and graduate programs (Kortendiek 2011), but the EU has not supervised its implementation nor poured resources into this policy, two indicators of passive resistance. Moreover, Europe-wide quality assurance processes do not mention gender at all (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 2015; International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education 2016), facilitating the evaporation of the gender equality mandates included – albeit often in relatively vague terms – in member states' equality or university laws (Grünberg 2011).

In the Spanish case, as Table 1 summarizes, calls for gender-sensitive teaching appear in up to five policy documents, all of them adopted by a left-wing central government. Some of these policy documents are blueprint policies, such as Act 1/2004 on integrated protection measures against gender-based violence and Act 3/2007 on the effective equality of women and men. In the case of the former, the women's movement demanded that universities provide training, teaching, and research on gender equality. With regards to the remaining policy documents, femocrats of the central government were highly involved in the mainstreaming of gender in Act 4/2007 on universities, in the Decree 1393/2007 on regulation of officially recognized study programs, and in Act 14/2011 on science, technology, and innovation.

While the arrival of the conservative Popular Party at the central government in 2011 led to a generalized backsliding in gender equality policy (Valiente 2013), the use of soft verbs (e.g. 'promote'), and emphasis on values and principles in these policy documents to justify the need for gender curricular reforms along with absence of oversight mechanisms paid lip service to

Table 1. Gender-sensitive Teaching in Spain's Legal Framework.

Legislation	Articles
Act 1/2004 on integrated protection measures against gender-based violence	Universities shall promote in all academic areas the training, teaching, and research on gender equality and nondiscrimination in a cross-cutting way (article 4.7).
Act 3/2007 on the effective equality of women and men	The significance and scope of gender equality shall be furthered into teaching and specific post-graduate studies must be created (article 25).
Act 4/2007 on universities	Equality between women and men must be incorporated as a value of universities (preamble).
Decree 1393/2007 on regulation of officially recognized study programs	As one of the general principles that must inspire the design of new degrees, topics related to equality between men and women shall be included, where appropriate, in the curricula (article 3.5).
Act 14/2011 on science, technology and innovation	Gender perspective as a cross-cutting category in science. Promotion of gender and women's studies (thirteenth additional provision).

Table 2. Gender indicators for the accreditation of university programs

Standards	Gender indicators
1. Quality of the training program	• Share of male and female students enlisted in the program. • Actions undertaken to enlist students of the underrepresented sex. • Number and type (basic, compulsory, optional) of modules/courses that incorporate a gender perspective or are gender-specific. • Teaching materials are gender-sensitive (gender-balance in reference list, use of inclusive and non-sexist images, texts and language). • Training is provided on how to conduct gender-sensitive research.
2. Relevance of the public information	• Publicly available sex-disaggregated data. • The program marketing materials (e.g. leaflets) and website are free from gender stereotypes and use inclusive images and language. • The syllabi make explicit the gender competencies and gender-sensitive learning outcomes included. • The institution's gender equality policy is publicized (gender action plan, anti-harassment policy, etc.).
3. Efficacy of the program's internal quality assurance system	• Existence of mechanisms to supervise the inclusion of a gender perspective in syllabi and teaching materials. • Gender mainstreaming is applied to the design, monitoring, and modifications of the faculty or school's programs. • The staff responsible for the programme's internal quality assurance system has received gender training. • The internal quality assurance system mainstreams gender (detailed gender equality goals, gender-sensitive indicators used in reports, etc.).
4. Suitability of teaching staff for the training program	• Gender differences in faculty staff profiles (e.g, permanent/non-permanent position) and teaching load. • Gender biases are taken into account when assessing faculty staff's performance (students' evaluations, recruitment and promotion, etc.). • Share of the program's faculty staff that have gender training and/or have participated in gender training sessions provided by the university. • Number of gender mainstreaming teaching innovation projects that the program's faculty staff participate in.
5. Effectiveness of learning support systems	• Actions undertaken to mainstream gender in career guidance activities (salary negotiation, letters of interest, etc.) and in the tutors' program. • Inclusion of non-discrimination clauses on the grounds of sex/sexual orientation/gender identity in internship agreements. • Training provided to the administrative staff on gender mainstreaming. • Adequacy of library resources related to the discipline that are devoted to gender mainstreaming or gender studies.
6. Quality of program (learning) outcomes	• Gender differences in students' retention and graduation rates, number of years needed for graduating, and employability rates after graduating. • Gender differences in students' satisfaction with the program. • Students' satisfaction with the presence of a gender perspective in the program.*

Source: AQU Catalunya (2019a). * A new question asking those completing their degree about the extent to which they have received a gender-sensitive teaching will be included in the survey carried out by AQU Catalunya on a periodical basis.

implementation work (Pastor et al. 2015). Passive resistance in the form of non-actions and non-decisions has prevailed, as institutional actors of this policy sub-system have adopted no measure to gender the curriculum. Likewise, quality assurance agencies made no reference to gender mainstreaming in their guidelines when university programs were harmonized to meet European standards in the late 2000s, and quality assurance processes have remained gender-blind (Nuño Gómez and Enrique Álvarez 2017).

Absence of instructions and lack of supervision of the implementation of the gender mandates by evaluation agencies have allowed universities to ignore and even actively resist the call for curricular reform. As Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González (2018) expose, denying the need for gender curricular reforms is sustained both by universities' organizational culture of disembodiment, which impedes identifying how the curriculum may shape gender (in)equality, and by prejudices against feminist policy. Likewise, trivializing the relevance of gender equality guidelines for teaching is rooted in gendered norms like the conflation of masculinity with expertise and reputation (e.g. claims such as

"there are no relevant women authors in my field"). Simultaneously, refusing to accept responsibility to change relies on apparently gender-neutral norms such as the academic freedom norm (e.g. claims such as "it cannot be imposed"), along with gendered norms like knowledge androcentrism (e.g. "gender is not relevant for my course"), and the very same gender-blind training of the faculty staff (e.g. "I would not know how to apply it").

The accumulation of passive and active resistance has rendered universities' equality units the sole actor striving to gender the curriculum, despite lacking direct power over curricular design. The Spanish Equality Law, Act 3/2007, mandated universities to set up gender equality units as well as to adopt gender action plans. Over the past decade, most Spanish universities – including all public universities – have created such units and adopted an equality plan (Elizondo, Novo, and Silvestre 2010; Pastor et al. 2015). In spite of being one of the strategic goals set out in this policy instrument and the proliferation of statutory mandates in the last decade (Table 1), actions promoting gender-sensitive teaching have been poorly implemented by universities (Nuño Gómez and Enrique Álvarez 2017; Verge and Cabruja 2017).

Furthermore, universities' equality units tend to be under-staffed and under-budgeted and remain rather peripheral within the organizational structure (Elizondo, Novo, and Silvestre 2010). Equality units have produced gender audits of undergraduate degrees (Verge and Cabruja 2017), which have yielded no impact on curricular planning due to the non-engagement of the managerial staff. Equality units have also organized gender training for the faculty staff. However, these courses tend to preach to the converted, as most of the attendees – predominantly female instructors – are already convinced about the need to mainstream gender in their teaching activities (Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González 2018). Likewise, equality units have organized extracurricular activities to compensate for the gender-blindness of programs, like workshops and roundtables, often in conjunction with students' associations, which increasingly mobilize to urge universities to undertake gender reforms in this area.[2]

Certainly, the key lesson learnt by universities' gender equality actors was that stronger norms and oversight regimes applicable to all universities were indispensable. Effecting a substantial gender curricular reform would thus forcibly require changing the "rules of the game" at the system level, which, in turn, requires acting strategically and building feminist alliances beyond universities.

Engendering the higher education curriculum: a play in four acts

On January 21, 2019 the Secretariat of Universities and Research of the Catalan government issued a press note whose headline read: "Starting in the 2020–2021 academic year university degrees will incorporate a gender equality perspective".[3] The sub-headline announced a major system-level reform to ensure compliance with this mandate:

> The recently published *General framework for incorporating the gender perspective in higher education teaching* establishes guidelines and recommendations to guarantee that the programs and the way in which they are taught take into account both the needs and the interests of women and men. The objective is that all degrees that go through a quality assurance process eliminate the barriers that sustain gender inequality.

To facilitate the understanding of the steps leading to this substantial policy change, the empirical analysis is narrated as a "play" in four "acts," paying attention to the strategies undertaken by feminist strategic alliances in each of these "acts."

Act 1: allying to change the rules

Given the lack of initiative – and even setback – of the conservative Spanish government (2011–2018) in the field of gender equality, a window of opportunity for formal policy change opened in Catalonia with the drafting of the Law for the Effective Equality of Women and Men, the so-called Catalan Equality Law (Act 17/2015). Women's policy agencies are outsiders in the policymaking of university laws and the women's movement has a limited influence in this policy sub-system. Conversely, gender

equality laws afford the chance to bring gender back into domains where it has been overlooked and it allows feminist actors to bridge policy fields. As already mentioned, gender inequalities in the health sector or the justice system can hardly be overcome if students continue to be trained as gender-blind professionals.

Due to subsequent early parliamentary elections (in 2010 and 2012) in Catalonia and change in the governing coalition (from a left-wing tripartite coalition to a center-right government), the Draft Equality Law promoted by the women's policy agency of the Catalan government (Women's Catalan Institute/*Institut Català de les Dones*) through a participatory process had been sitting in a drawer for a few years. In 2015, when the processing of this bill was resumed, the center-right government had a minority status and needed the support of a center-left party. The new version of the bill submitted by the governing party substantially watered down feminist demands, which was met with reluctance by the women's movement. Feminist left-wing MPs then strategized to take over the legislative process and substantially reshape the bill.

Firstly, as the Work and Social Affairs Committee – where equality legislation was adopted at the time – was overloaded, female MPs of the non-legislative Equality Committee lobbied for and obtained the delegation of part of the legislative process.[4] Liberal and center-right MPs joined this exceptional cross-party women's alliance. This was partially facilitated by the fact that most party spokespersons in this committee were first-time MPs. Being less entrenched in parliamentary power dynamics and more eager to achieve policy impact facilitated both the creation of personal relationships of trust among MPs and the reaching of consensus.[5] Secondly, a round of consultations with women's organizations and feminist academics was set up through exhaustive committee witness hearings. Some left-wing MPs also used informal arenas (meetings outside parliament) to coalesce with the women's movement and gather their demands, as they did not want to put forth a law that was not supported by the latter.[6]

The main objectives of this feminist strategic alliance were to strengthen the gender mandates with unambiguous verbs – for instance, "must do" rather than "promote" – and establish clear oversight mechanisms to prevent the evaporation of gender equality goals.[7] Feminist academics with membership in gender-specific research groups played a double role in this constellation. They acted both as gender experts making contributions to domains falling within their areas of expertise (e.g., gender quotas, health, education, justice system, etc.) and as feminist activists within academia, making proposals for re-gendering higher education institutions (see Parlament de Catalunya 2015a, 2015b). Simultaneously, feminist activists with expertise in other fields called for strengthening some policies within universities. While this policy sector has never been a priority of the women's movement and universities' governance arrangements are quite unknown to activists,[8] the opening provided by the drafting of a gender equality law eased the establishment of connections. For example, feminist lawyers advocated for statutory anti-harassment protocols in higher education institutions and feminist teachers claimed that a gender perspective should be mainstreamed in the curriculum of all education levels, including universities.[9] Based on the contributions collected in these formal and informal consultation processes, hundreds of amendments were attached to the bill. The predominance of the territorial issue in the public agenda meant that neither parties nor the media paid much attention to the bill during its processing, which allowed the feminist alliance to get away with its informal strategies.[10]

Next, women MPs from the Equality Committee strategized to have their parties support the introduced changes. Those amendments failing to reach unanimity across parties were deliberately kept alive until the very last minute of the legislative term. Since the Equality Law was passed in the last plenary session, parties were pressured to accept all remaining amendments and thus give a green light to the passing of the law in order to avoid a loss of reputation on gender equality issues on the brink of new elections.[11] Although Catalonia's independence campaign has remained rather marginal for the women's movement (Alonso 2018), it would have been costly for the ruling party, which was running in a coalition with its support left-wing party in the 2015 elections (both pro-independence parties), not to pass the law.

The amendments subject to a floor vote completely redrafted several of the original articles, as was the case of the measures related to universities, which some government officials opposed on the basis that the constitutional principle of "universities' autonomy" was infringed.[12] Whereas the initial bill made no reference at all to the curricula, Article 28 of Act 17/2015, devoted to universities, established that undergraduate and graduate programs must mainstream gender in all areas of knowledge and gender-specific courses or modules must be created in the core curriculum (i.e., not as optional courses). Likewise, universities must guarantee that the faculty staff receives gender training. Most crucially, these gender mandates are to be supervised by the external quality assurance system all university degrees must go through, entailing that the quality assurance framework itself must include a gender equality perspective.

Act 2: broadening alliances to remind university actors about the new rules

Universities did not feel compelled to take action when equality units put on the table the gender curricular reforms mandated in the Equality Law, leading universities' equality units to coalesce to "remind" institutional actors about the new formal rules. To do so, alliances were broadened within the policy sub-system using existing mainstream institutional settings, which afforded gender equality actors the possibility of having a greater impact.[13] The first one was the Vives University Network (Xarxa Vives d'Universitats, XVU), whose gender equality working group brings together once per year about fifteen directors of universities' equality units with the explicit goal of gendering universities' institutional agenda.[14] Most of them are feminist academics who participate in gender research groups at their respective institutions as well as in the women's caucuses of their respective disciplines. Since its inception, this working group has conceived of itself as "a producer rather than a consumer of best practices."[15] Simultaneously, the members of the executive secretariat of this mainstream organization have acted as key allies. Their participation in the working group meetings has significantly facilitated the understanding of the proposals put forth by the directors of equality units and the adoption of gender equality as a strategic area of the XVU annual work program.[16]

Since its onset, this working group has defined a biannual plan. The first year is devoted to collecting information and creating standardized gender indicators for domains where such indicators do not exist or are insufficient. In the second year, a report is produced with a goal of dismantling the fallacy of gender equality in higher education and denouncing the lack of awareness about gender-specific problems by mainstream actors in the policy sub-system with decision-making capacity.[17] The second biannual plan (2016–2017) centered on gender mainstreaming in teaching. The report produced in the first year audited the performance of XVU universities in this sub-policy area, shined a light on the non-fulfillment of the gender mandates, and identified the actors responsible for enacting the required reforms, putting special emphasis on those involved in evaluation processes (Verge and Cabruja 2017). The secretariat of the XVU launched the report as an institutional publication and circulated it widely. Another strategy used by feminists was to invite external actors to the working group meetings, like staff members from the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, AQU Catalunya). In this case, the goal was to sensitize them about the policy problem, namely the causes and consequences of gender-blindness in the curriculum, and to get advice on how to navigate the system and the language of quality assurance to push the reform agenda forward.

The second institutional setting where feminist strategic alliances were forged is the Inter-University Council of Catalonia (Consell Interuniversitari de Catalunya, CIC), which gathers all (public and private) universities along with governmental actors, more specifically its Women and Science Committee. This non-standing committee, established in 2005, performs both agenda-setting and oversight roles in the field of universities' gender equality policy. The directors of universities' equality units meet three times per year with key stakeholders, including senior officials from the departments and agencies responsible for higher education policy as well as from the Catalan women's policy agency (Alonso 2015; Pastor and Acosta 2016). Despite lacking regulatory power, this

Committee had already achieved relevant outcomes, such as the diffusion of gender action plans across all Catalan universities within a year after the enactment of the Spanish Equality Law (2007) and the replication for the Catalan university system of the gender indicators included in the *She Figures* reports issued by the European Commission (Berga 2018).[18] This unique institutional setting within the Spanish university system has allowed crafting an alliance between the directors of Catalan universities' gender equality units and female bureaucrats.[19]

Right after the passing of the Catalan Equality Law (Act 17/2015), the directors of the universities' equality units requested the quality assurance agency AQU Catalunya to explain how and when it would mainstream gender in the evaluation of university degrees and invited it to become an ex officio member of the Women and Science Committee. The director of this agency committed to produce specific guidelines to monitor progress in gender curricular change, and he agreed to send a permanent representative to this Committee. The person appointed happened to be one of the staff members having attended the meetings of the XVU gender equality working group. She also integrated the specific task force AQU Catalunya set up, composed of gender experts – whose names were suggested by universities' equality units – and quality assurance experts, a combination also found in the coordination team.

Act 3: re-gendering quality assurance standards

The above mentioned task force carried out its work for about a year, culminating in the production of the *General framework for incorporating the gender perspective in higher education teaching* (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya 2019a), a document primarily addressed to faculties or schools, which are the organizational units within universities responsible for the planning, management, and evaluation of teaching quality. While the task force worked without interference, there were some initial tensions about the technicalization of the new gender indicators for assessing university programs. Gender experts' key goal was to enshrine gender equality in the existing quality assurance framework. Effort was made to explain that mainstreaming gender into teaching is not a managerial solution, and that quality assurance guidelines could not become a checklist leading to a "gender washing" of the new policy (for a review of tensions on the work of gender experts, see Kunz and Elisabeth 2019).

For this reason, the general framework problematizes the neutrality of the curriculum, the references listed in syllabi, and the teaching and learning environments, thereby politicizing these aspects and providing a selection of gender biases that have been unveiled by extant research for each of the five areas of knowledge that cluster university programs (Social Sciences and Law, Arts and Humanities, Science, Life Sciences, Engineering and Architecture). With a view to gendering course content, a cross-cutting competence is suggested, namely "to develop the ability to assess inequality on the grounds of sex and gender, to design solutions" (AQU 2019a, 15),[20] and emphasis is put on its application to all courses across all disciplines. Examples of learning outcomes by discipline are also listed, making explicit how gender-sensitive teaching implies considering "sex" and "gender" as crucial analytical variables. Furthermore, the general framework underscores that engendering the curriculum must go hand-in-hand with the transformation of the pervasive gendered institutional norms and practices that (re)produce gender inequality at universities, including the institution's and the faculty or school's planning, organization, and human resources policy (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya 2019a).

The general framework was approved by the agency's Institutional Evaluation and Programs Committee, which includes universities' vice-rectors, and it informed the revision of the *Guide to the accreditation of recognized bachelor's and master's degree programs* (AQU Catalunya 2019b), which AQU Catalunya published in July 2019. Table 2 shows a selection of the gender indicators that have been mainstreamed across the six extant quality assurance standards. Starting in January 2020, all new degrees will have to include the gender dimension for their validation (ex-ante assessment). Standing undergraduate and graduate programs will have to do so via the

corresponding evaluation stage, with the revised quality assurance scheme coming into force in March 2020 for modifications and in 2021 for accreditations. In its immediate application, non-compliance with gender mainstreaming will not automatically entail the non-fulfillment of a standard, although the programs' accreditation will be conditioned, thereby compelling the faculty or school to redress the shortcomings identified with adequate actions (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya 2019a).

Act 4: creating resources and institutional incentives for the professoriate

Since the professoriate is the ultimate implementer of gender curricular reforms in its daily teaching practice, it must actively engage in the policy change. Furthering the work plan centered on gender-sensitive teaching, the Vives University Network funded the elaboration of the teaching resource *Guides for mainstreaming gender in university teaching*, a set of eighteen guides covering various disciplines that provide recommendations for re-gendering course goals and contents, references, and teaching and assessment methods.[21] The goal is to erode the professoriate's resistance to gendering courses, compensating for its lack of gender training, and combating the belief that gender is not applicable to certain fields with practical examples on how to do so.[22]

To make sure that universities are acquainted with the new gender indicators and implementation deadlines, the Vives University Network organized in November 2019 a joint training session for the working group on gender equality and the working group on quality assurance, reinforcing the connection between quality and equality. While this policy reform only applies to Catalan universities, the fact that the quality assurance units of Valencian universities were also present in the session may pave the way for a potential policy diffusion, as AQU Catalunya has coordinated the Spanish Network of University Quality Assurance Agencies since 2017. Also, the delegate for gender equality of the countrywide forum for university co-operation (CRUE) has urged the Spanish quality assurance agency (ANECA) to emulate AQU Catalunya's new framework.

For their part, the governmental actors sitting on the Women and Science Committee of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia's increasing commitment to gender equality led them to take on the suggestion made by the directors of universities' equality units to institute a system-level incentive that affords academic recognition to teaching staff's gender mainstreaming initiatives. The *Award Encarna Sanahuja Yll for excellence in the incorporation of a gender perspective in teaching practice* was set up in 2019,[23] mirroring the long-standing *Award Jaume Vivens Vives for excellence in quality teaching*. As is the case of the latter, the new award is delivered in the Catalan universities' inaugural session of the academic year, a prominent event attended by all rectors and their executive teams. It is worth 20,000 €, an amount to be reinvested by winning teams in gender-sensitive teaching projects within their institution.

Conclusions

This article has paid attention to the strategic alliances crafted by feminist actors at different institutional settings to achieve gender curricular reforms. Feminist academics, especially those leading university equality units in Catalonia and Valencia, have not only made use of extant opportunity structures, including multi-level venue shopping, but also created new openings for stirring policy change. Making four mainstream institutions engage with gender curricular reforms – a legislative chamber, a network of universities, an inter-university council, and a quality assurance agency – constitutes a remarkable milestone. While joining forces with feminist MPs and representatives of women's organizations allowed passing hard statutory gender mandates, allying with both male and female bureaucrats from governmental and semi-public arenas led to the establishment of gender-specific quality assurance indicators as well as other institutional incentives, like an award that recognizes the value of engendering teaching. Such policy reforms would not have been possible without the momentum instilled by equality units to make policy actors "remember" the new rules

through cooperation in institutional settings that facilitate the coordination of university policies and through the production of gender-sensitive teaching guides.

The outputs achieved by these feminist strategic alliances have been recognized as good practices by the European Institute for Gender Equality in its *Gender Equality in Academia and Research Toolkit* (GEAR).[24] Most domestic legal frameworks call for the need to mainstream gender into the curriculum through either university or equality laws and, more generally, the incorporation of a gender perspective in all phases of policy making, including evaluation, is an international core policy principle. Given that system-level best practices are more likely to be cross-loaded to other contexts than those from a single university, the gender reforms introduced in the Catalan university system have the potential to be emulated, particularly due to AQU Catalunya's privileged position within quality assurance domestic and international forums.[25]

The article makes several contributions. First, it calls attention to the least examined of the policy interventions in the field of gender equality in academia, namely the need for gendering the curricula. Second, it sheds light on the role of gender equality change actors in the university policy sector, particularly universities' equality units, which have hitherto received little scholarship attention. Third, by focusing on the largely under researched post-adoption phases, the article contributes to feminist policy studies, furthering the analysis of the interaction between feminist activists and political institutions at these stages and delving into how evaluation can bring gender back into the policy process to produce feminist outputs.

While similar political institutions may offer dissimilar opportunity structures to feminist activists in different countries and feminist actors may choose different strategies to challenge the status quo in similar political systems (cf. Chappell 2000), the lessons derived from the specific and maybe unique case study examined here are twofold. On the one hand, gender equality policy failures can hardly be overcome with isolated efforts at each university, so alliances are needed to effect changes at the system level. Such alliances are more likely to bring about tangible outcomes when they manage to involve regular organizations and institutions within the policy sub-sector. Besides making these actors aware of the policy problem and the gendered implications of non-action, the success of feminist strategic alliances in the post-adoption phase requires engaging with dominant discourses and belief systems.

From a feminist perspective, quality assurance has been criticized for the introduction of neoliberal, competitive, and marketization dynamics in universities, including personnel evaluations based on criteria that "reflect male principles of academic knowledge production" (Luke 1997, 438). Indeed, gender equality concerns have played no role in the establishment of quality assurance conceptual frameworks, which build on representations of "disembodied, cognitive, socially decontextualized" teachers, managers, and learners (Morley 2005, 412). This notwithstanding, whereas gender justice arguments do not tend to resonate with university policy actors (Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González 2018), quality assurance ineluctably does, and it constitutes the sole binding evaluation mechanism for higher education institutions. Simultaneously, as shown in this article, quality assurance "can be used strategically for a politics of transformation," enabling the introduction of procedures that inquire and may stimulate change on gender inequalities (Luke 1997, 434).

On the other hand, even if feminist strategic alliances might need to be crafted again to monitor the effective implementation of gender reforms, universities' gender equality entrepreneurs now stand in a substantially improved position to demand compliance. Certainly, accusations of feminist doctrinalism, a common form of active resistance at universities, cannot be sustained when statutory gender mandates are supervised by a mainstream institution such as a quality assurance agency. Furthermore, since the way in which gender is (or is not) framed in policies has relevant consequences (Bustelo 2017), gender mainstreaming mandates will no longer remain invisible and subject to the good will of the implementers, lifting the burden of proof from feminist academics and universities' equality units. Also, since this policy change requires improving the gender competence of the professoriate and quality assurance staff, gender expertise is likely to be increasingly valued at universities.

Notes

1. The three MPs from the Parliament of Catalonia interviewed were the chair (left party) and the spokespersons of the governing (center-right) party at the time and its support (center-left) party in the Equality Committee. The four activists interviewed participated in either formal or informal settings when the Catalan Equality law was being drafted. The four directors of universities' equality units have served in this position throughout the period under examination.
2. For example, in the period 2014–2019 students filed three motions on this topic at my university's Senate – the representative body of the academic community. The studentship had already vindicated the need to gender the curricula when the EHEA was being designed (European Students' Union 2008).
3. See: https://govern.cat/govern/docs/2019/01/21/17/20/d245541b-9a9c-47a4-9d32-b1c144820d56.pdf
4. Interview no. 3, MP, December 2018.
5. Interview no. 1, MP, January 2019.
6. Interview no. 2, MP, December 2018.
7. Interviews no. 9 and no 10., feminist activists, January 2020.
8. Interview no. 10, feminist activist, January 2020.
9. Interview no. 8, feminist activist, January 2020.
10. Interview no. 1, MP, January 2019.
11. Interviews no. 2 and no. 3, MPs, December 2018.
12. Interview no. 3, MP, December 2018.
13. Interview no. 6, equality unit director, December 2019.
14. Interview no. 5, equality unit director, December 2019. While other arenas for cooperation among gender equality units exist in Spain, they are mainly devoted to sharing best practices and, hitherto, the planning of common strategies has been rare. These are the Gender Equality Units' Network for Excellence (Red de Unidades de Igualdad de Género para la Excelencia, RUIGEU) and the sub-group on gender equality within the sustainability working group of the Spanish Universities Rectors' Conference (CRUE).
15. Interview no. 7, equality unit director, December 2019.
16. Interview no. 4, equality unit director, December 2019.
17. Interview no. 6, equality unit director, December 2019.
18. The Spanish countrywide biannual report *Científicas en Cifras* (2017) does not provide either disaggregated data by region – bar the total share of female researchers.
19. Interview no. 6, equality unit director, December 2019.
20. It should be understood from a "gender+" perspective that takes into account the intersection of various axes of inequality like race, class, or sexual orientation (see Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2017).
21. These guides can be accessed at the XVU website: https://www.vives.org/programes/igualtat-genere/guies-docencia-universitaria-perspectiva-genere/. They have already been translated into Galician and the Spanish translation is under way.
22. Interview no. 5 and no.7, equality unit directors, December 2019.
23. Encarna Sanahuja Yll (1948–2010) was a Catalan archeologist whose breakthrough feminist research and teaching was very inspirational for subsequent generations of scholars.
24. See the sections 'Integrating gender in research and education content' and 'Analytical measures, targets, indicators, monitoring and evaluation': https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/examples
25. It hosts the Secretariat of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) since October 2013, and sits in the executive board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and in the steering committee of the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF).

Acknowledgments

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