INVESTIGATING THE ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY AGENDAS

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ABSTRACT

Governmental interventions to promote gender equality – for example to encourage female participation in the formal economy and male engagement with the informal unpaid economy of care - are costly. However, there has been little examination in feminist analyses of policy reform of the economic determinants of gendered policy change. We investigate, using graphs and descriptive analysis derived from three data sets, whether the agenda setting possibilities of feminist policy actors are constrained by economic conditions. Our hypotheses are that it is easier to get gender equality policies on the agenda, firstly, when the economy is growing and, secondly, when advocates utilise an economic case to frame their arguments. We find, firstly, that gender equality policy agendas appear to follow periods of positive economic performance and, secondly, that economic framing of gender equality policy is essential.

INTRODUCTION

Government policies designed to facilitate women’s participation in the workforce are not without cost to states and employers. This raises a question of whether gender equality advocates will find it harder to get these issues onto the policy agenda in adverse economic conditions. Indeed the current global economic downturn has led to speculation that developments in gender equality policy might be stalled (Wintour, 2008) and that women will suffer the brunt of the recession (Scheele, 2009). On the other hand, feminists in Government have argued that equality policies are more essential than ever in times of economic recession (Harman, 2009). This paper investigates the relationship between gender equality policies reaching the governmental agenda and economic indicators. We argue that this relationship is under-researched in both the public policy and feminist literatures and we develop a
research agenda to explore whether economic conditions place constraints on feminist agenda setting activity.

The concepts and theories of public policy analysts have had limited application to the study of gender policy change (Mazur, 2002). Those feminist studies which have explored public policy making around achieving gender policy change have predominantly looked at the agency of feminist policy actors in legislative, executive and non-governmental venues such as parliaments (Childs, 2004), women’s policy agencies (Stetson McBride and Mazur, 1995; Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007), and the core executive (Annesley, Gains and Rummery, 2007; Annesley and Gains, 2010), looking comparatively both across and within states. The focus of feminist policy analysts has been on policies to achieve better representation, or specific substantive policy issues such as abortion, prostitution, rape and domestic violence, as agendas which bring into policy analysis issues ignored by the mainstream. These studies show the ways in which feminist policy agency is constrained by institutional factors, policy legacies or party politics.

However, we argue that it is important to consider the economic determinants of feminist policy agenda setting, especially in more mainstream policy areas where gender policy may be costly or carry fiscally redistributive consequences. This paper explores whether there is an association between economic indicators - for example, economic growth, rates of employment and public opinion on the economy as the most important issue - and policy agendas which have the aim of promoting gender equality in employment. We do this through a case study of when gender equality policy reaches the policy agenda in a single country: the United Kingdom (UK).

Initially we review the feminist scholarship on achieving gender policy change and make the case that the economic context of change is an important subject of research. We then examine research from mainstream public policy which has explored the link between socio economic indicators and agenda setting, drawing attention to the difficulty in determining causal relationships. Next we set out our methods and data sources. In a findings section, we firstly compare descriptively the relationship
between legislative intent to encourage labour market participation by women and/or encourage the involvement of men in the informal caring sphere, and economic indicators such as GDP growth, unemployment and public opinion views on the economy as the most important issue. Secondly we examine the argumentation made to explain the purpose of legislation, to identify the extent to which an economic case is made, and how. In conclusion we argue that there is a link between economic indicators and feminist agenda setting activity in the sense that feminist advocates need to frame equality arguments around labour market growth in order to advocate fiscally redistributive gender equality change.

THE DETERMINANTS OF GENDER POLICY CHANGE

Achieving policy change is hard and integrating new issues such as gender equality into established policy agendas is harder still (Gains, Annesley and Rummery, 2010). Governments can only provide limited attention to new policy development and radical budgetary shifts are on the whole rare (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007). Committed policy advocates may take years to bring about a coalition for change (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). What is needed is a window of opportunity to get policies on the agenda (Kingdon, 1995). Yet agenda setting activity around gender equality policies is under-researched and requires greater attention in both the mainstream public policy and feminist policy change literatures. There has been relatively little attention paid to agenda setting in feminist scholarship (for an exception see Terkildsen and Schnell, 1997) and the extent to which agenda setting is an analytical focus, it arises because of an interest by feminist scholars on the long term activities of policy advocacy coalitions (for example see Abrar, Lovenduski and Margetts 2000; Annesley and Gains, 2010; Annesley, 2010).

In this section we review the literature to date on the determinants of gender policy change from the perspective of both the feminist and ‘mainstream’ scholarship. The purpose of this review is to show that feminist scholarship has not hitherto focussed on the economic dimensions of gender policy change. The mainstream public policy literature, on the other hand, highlights the need not to be deterministic about economics as ‘the’ factor influencing what can and cannot be done.
The feminist scholarship on gendered policy change centres predominantly on the substantive representation of women (SRW) approach.¹ This literature investigates the theoretical and empirical links between the increased or improved numerical representation of women in formal politics (referred to as the descriptive representation of women, DRW) and women-friendly or gender equality policy outcomes. This is predominantly an agent-centred approach which increasingly places ‘critical actors’ (as opposed to a ‘critical mass’ of women) at the centre of analysis (Childs and Krook, 2006). Critical actors are defined as ‘those who initiate policy proposals on their own, even when women form a small minority, and embolden other to take steps to promote policies for women, regardless of the proportion of female representatives’ (Childs and Krook, 2006: 528).

While leading scholars in SRW theory recognise that critical actors a can be ‘male and female legislators, ministers, party members, bureaucrats and members of civil society groups’ (Celis et al, 2008: 104), empirical studies remain much more limited in scope. Studies adopting the SRW approach have traditionally focussed on the contribution of female critical actors in one of two institutional settings: parliaments (Childs, 2004) or women’s policy agencies (Stetson and Mazur, 1995; Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007). A wealth of empirical material has developed along these lines. For the SRW in parliament see, for example, Sarah Childs’ (2004) study of the impact of New Labour women in the UK parliament, and for the SRW in women’s policy agencies, see the impressive body of state feminism empirical scholarship by the RNGS network (Stetson and Mazur, 1995 etc.).

Two important critiques of the SRW have emerged in recent years. Firstly, an institutionalist critique of this SRW scholarship argues that to understand how and when feminist political actors make a difference to gender policy outcomes it is necessary to focus on where political power and resources lie, rather than on where women are located (Chappell, 2006).² For example: Annesley and Gains (2010) argue that in Westminster systems like the UK it is necessary to look at actors such as feminist ministers, senior bureaucrats and policy advisors in the core executive as the

¹ An alternative approach is gender mainstreaming (see Squires, 2007).
² See www.femfiin.com for more details of the feminist institutionalist project.
key venue for policy change and that it is ministerial advocacy which is critical in this setting.

Yet even such institutionalist studies have their limits: they demonstrate that it is not always possible for well-resourced actors in powerful political settings to push through gender policy change (Gains, Annesley and Rummery, 2010). Other barriers to progress exist and recent work examining the introduction of work-life balance and flexible labour market policies (Annesley, 2010) identifies three economic dimensions to gender policy change: the model of capitalism / welfare capitalism; the strength of business interests in the policy-making process; and the performance of the economy (i.e. boom or recession). And Kantola and Squires (2008) suggest that state feminism is developing into ‘market feminism’ out of the need of feminists to work within a neo-liberal frame when making / staking their claims for gender equality policy.

The second significant critique relates to the limited domains of public policy that are the subject of SRW scholarship. Empirical studies tend to focus on the ‘feminist policy sector’ (Mazur, 2002) as a distinct and discrete sector of policy making rather than as an additional dimension to mainstream policy. Or, as Mackay (2008) puts it, SRW empirical research remains on the ‘margins of legislative activity’. As such, the majority of SRW empirical research focuses on the impact of ‘critical actors’ on public policy outcomes in such areas as domestic violence (Waylen, 2007; Mackay, 2010), abortion (Stetson 2001), prostitution (Outshoorn 2004) and political representation (Lovenduski, 2005). This focus on ‘women’s issues’ overlooks the importance of understanding whether and how mainstream policy making in areas such as economic, welfare or even defence policy might be gendered by critical actors (Annesley, Gains and Rummery, 2007 Annesley, 2010).

For these reasons we argue that an economic dimension to understanding the determinants of gender policy change is required. We need to understand the role that economic determinants – rather than agency or institutional political factors – play in enabling or constraining gender policy change. And we need a better understanding of the difficulties faced by critical actors, who have institutional capacity, to introduce
gender policy change in mainstream domains which have costly economic and fiscal implications and trade offs.

The costs of gender equality policies can fall on governments, employers and men in formal and/or informal work. For governments, costs arise from higher fiscal transfers in the form of social security payments. Also costly for government are the compliance and implementation costs of policy reform and oversight. For employers, particularly small employers, negative costs might arise directly from wage costs for example from equal pay legislation, from benefit costs such as maternity pay or indirectly from administrative costs of introducing and managing the policy change. For male employees, the cost is perceived to arise from their displacement by female employees, and the often detrimental financial impact of undertaking informal unpaid caring work. The impact and extent of these costs will be mediated by the model of capitalism / welfare capitalism, the condition of the economy (boom or recession), and by the role of the business lobby in government policy-making (Annesley, 2010).

It is our argument that in policy areas which carry large redistributive consequences; between the state and the market, within the state as employer and within the private realm between men and women, feminist advocates will face economic constraints on their agenda setting activity beyond the institutional and agency related determinants outlined above.

In turning attention to examining the economic determinants of gender policy change we are re-visiting a line of public policy scholarship which has been researched since the 1960s but has been less prominent recently (Blomquist, 1999; John, 2003, 484). Although we are not seeking to replicate the large N work of these earlier scholars, we do need to take care to learn from the development of this line of scholarship and be clear what we see as the transmission route which we expect to see between economic indicators (including public opinion on the economy) and the ability of feminist advocates with institutional capacity – in the UK this means primarily ministers – to get gender quality policies on the agenda.
Debates around causality are well rehearsed in the recent literature on public opinion, does public opinion inform policy makers' judgements or do policy advocates seek to manipulate public opinion (Jones and Jenkins-Smith, 2009, 47). Our argument is not that socio economic variables are the sole or necessary determinant of gender policy change. Rather we argue, like Hofferbert (1974), that policy agendas, for example policies to support gender equality in the workplace, are produced by elites, operating within government institutions, and who in this process are affected by the socio economic environment and public opinion, in this case on the economy (Blomquist, 1999, 205). This link between elite perceptions and policy action, means that wider economic indicators are part of the elite ‘appreciate system’ which informs judgements about the possibilities for policy change reaching the governmental agenda (Vickers, 1965; Smith, 1982; Mazm anian and Sabatier, 1980). As Kingdon suggests, officials note changing public moods and act on this information to promote or downgrade possible policy agendas (Kingdon, 1995). McBeth et al, describe how policy advocates seek to bolster their arguments ‘in the certainty of scientifically deduced numbers and facts’ when making the case for policy change and demonstrate narrative tactics identifiable in how they construct ‘who wins and who loses’ (2007, p88). Feminist advocates, we argue, will be required to use economic arguments to argue for change when and where it reinforces their ‘core beliefs’ (Jones and Jenkins-Smith, 2009, 45).

Hypotheses

In arguing the need to explore the economic determinants of gender policy change we are not seeking to move away entirely from an analytical focus on the institutional and agency features of feminist advocacy. We are simply, as Steinberg describes, moving the focus ‘upstream’ to investigate the causal importance of economic determinants and the appraisal of these determinants by feminist advocates on the agenda setting process (2007, p 196). This is a small N study designed to identify evidence of economic determinants to gender policy change. What we seek to clarify is the descriptive relationship and analytical argumentation in respect of economic determinants.
To do so we look firstly at the possibilities of getting gender policy in a mainstream policy domain – equal opportunities employment policy – onto the policy agenda at different points of the economic business cycle.

Hi: Our first hypothesis is that it is easier to get gender equality policies onto the policy agenda when the economy is performing well.

Our case study – the UK – is a liberal market political economy (Coates, 2000; Hall and Soskice, 2001) and a liberal welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990). As such we expect that gender equality policy is perceived to be both costly and hard to implement and will need to be framed with in the grain of the market, that is, to be of benefit to business and to promote economic growth.

Hii Our second hypothesis is that gender equality agendas will be supported by an economic case.

DATA AND METHODS

Identifying Gender Equality Policies on the Government Policy Agenda

To test our two hypotheses on the relationship between gender equality advocacy and economic constraints we first needed to identify clear examples of gender equality policies getting on the agenda – our dependent variable – in the UK. We did this by drawing on data collected by the Policy Agendas Project in the UK, as part of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP)3 This project brings together scholars in twelve countries developing systematic indicators of issue attention within their nations’ political systems using a common policy content coding framework, originally developed for the United States, (www.policyagendas.org) and allowing comprehensive and reliable comparison across issues, countries and venues.

3 See www.comparativeagendas.org. We would like to thank Shaun Bevan, Will Jennings and Peter John from the UK Policy Agendas Project and Sandra Resodihardjo from the Netherlands Policy Agendas project for their assistance and advice. See www.policyagendas.org.uk and www.policyagendas.org for more details.
The UK Policy Agendas project (www.policyagendas.org.uk) collects and organizes data from various archived sources to trace changes in the national policy agenda and public policy outcomes since 1911. We draw on a coding of the UK King or Queen’s ‘Speeches from the Throne’ at the state opening of each session of Parliament since 1945. These speeches delivered by the titular Head of State, are in fact a statement of forthcoming executive legislative intent and thus demonstrate government priorities for the forthcoming parliamentary session. Analysis of the UK speeches indicates a strong relationship between mentions made in the Speech and Acts of Parliament (Bevan, John and Jennings 2009 forthcoming). Thus, statements in the speeches from the throne, which refer to policies which promote gender equality, are a clear indication that these policies have reached the political agenda for action. The advantage of using these data is that it is possible to not only to benefit from the conceptual and empirical work to identify policy agendas by topic, but it would also allow us to replicate our methods in other participating countries to examine more widely the economic determinants of gender equality policy agenda setting in the future.

We firstly identified the relevant topic codes for gender equality policies and then applied these codes to the UK Policy Agendas data set (King / Queen’s Speeches) for the period 1945-2008. We examined the raw data set to identify relevant policy agendas since 1945 (and the beginning of an interventionist welfare state in the UK) to identify gender equality policies reaching the government agenda for action.

In this process of identifying gender equality legislative intent, we honed in on policy agendas which had the specific intention of furthering gender equality. As our hypotheses relate to the ability of feminist advocates to get gender equality policies on the agenda during varying economic circumstances we identified only those proposals that specifically had the intent to either draw women into the labour market, support their remaining or returning to the labour market, or facilitate men engaging with informal caring responsibilities.

4 We used the following codes: 200; 202; 500; 501; 502; 503; 504; 505; 508; 1208; 1300 and 1302.
We have not therefore undertaken a full gender impact assessment of all of the legislative proposals which could have impacted on gender equality, either positively or negatively. There were many ‘gender neutral’ legislative proposals which, once enacted, could have had unintended consequences upon gender inequalities. For example the 1948 National Insurance Act, was not aimed at addressing gender equality, although it arguably had the (huge) unintended policy consequence of ensuring many women withdrew from the paid labour market as a consequence of the entitlement and eligibility rules and the incentive structures for family life this legislation created. Likewise we did not include legislative proposals which had the unintended consequences of improving gender inequalities, such as the 1998 Minimum Wage Act, which disproportionately benefited women in the UK because two-thirds of the 1.5 million initially entitled to higher pay as a result of the introduction of the NMW were low paid women (Rake, 2001, 217).

Establishing a Relationship to Economic Performance

To obtain our independent economic variables we drew on the UK’s Office for National Statistics time series analysis for basic economic indicators to obtain firstly annual GDP % growth going back to 1948. From this we were able to create a lagged index showing % GDP growth the previous year. We wanted to create a lagged index (Resodihardjo, 2009, p 31) as measures appearing in the speech from the throne (which usually takes place in late Autumn) reflects argumentation within the core executive taking place during the preceding Parliamentary year. Government departments will publish white and green papers and, since 2002, draft legislation, in potential areas for action which will reflect economic forecasts and indicators. But there is competition for legislative attention from the different parts of Government with likely measures jostling for backing within and across the core executive. The final discussions about which measures will go forward for inclusion in the forthcoming speech from the throne will take place in the spring and early summer of the calendar year just as the previous years economic statistics are being reported. Therefore we suggest that lagging these economic and public opinion data will capture best the information of relevance to the appreciative system of key advocates and veto players in the core executive.
Next we obtained the unemployment rate (000s) (adjusted for changes in the claimant count) going back to 1971 and created a lagged index for the unemployment count (presented in thousands). Finally we obtained IPSOS/MORI polling data from 1977 showing annual average % respondents giving the economy/economic situation as the most important issue (MII) to indicate public confidence in the economy and again produced a lagged index to show if this had been rising or falling the preceding year. We produced descriptive analysis, correlations and graphs to investigate the relationship between gender equality policies reaching the governmental agenda and these basic economic indicators.

Finally, to investigate the argumentation made by advocates in respect of the policy agendas identified we examined the second reading debates on gender equality legislation which was heralded by the speech from the throne. At the second reading of a public bill, the Secretary of State (cabinet minister) responsible for presenting and steering the proposed legislation sets out the case for change, reviewing the background and rationale for change. The debate is summed up by a deputy minister. We examined these speeches to determine if the argumentation was related to an economic case for change or an equality case for change.

RESULTS

Gender Equality Mentions in Speeches from the Throne

Using the policy agendas codebook we identified relevant codes which could relate to gender equality policy change\(^5\). This resulted in a raw scores sample of 318 policy mentions from which we were able to identify 15 gender equality policy mentions for the period 1945-2008. Of these 15 references to ‘legislative intent’, Table 1 shows 11 resulted in public bills, one in secondary legislation and three in government reviews.

Table 1 about here

\(^5\) We used the following codes: 200; 202; 500; 501; 502; 503; 504; 505; 508; 1208; 1300 and 1302.
The incidence of gender equality agendas was spread over time from a period pre-dating the second wave feminist demands of the early 1970s. The first involved an extension of maternity pay rights following a review of legislation by the National Insurance Advisory Committee (an independent body with a quasi legalistic oversight remit) which was accepted by the then Conservative administration. The second is the 1969 Equal Pay Bill championed by Labour Secretary of State Barbara Castle. The period 1973-4 saw sex discrimination policy agendas included in the speech from the throne two years running: the first from the outgoing Conservative administration which resulted in a green paper; the second from the incoming Labour administration which resulted in legislation.

During the neo-liberal economic years of Thatcher and Major Conservative administrations (1979-97) it is the UK’s membership of the (now) European Union (EU) 6 which is the important driver for policy change. Gender equality was established as an EU priority by Article 119 of the founding Treaty of Rome (1957) (Hoskyns, 1996). 7 However although issues reaching the domestic policy agenda might be the consequence of EU directives or court judgements rather than domestic policy initiatives (Hoskyns, 1996; Cichowski, 2001) there is also considerable variability in how countries respond to these external stimuli (Dona, 2009).

Finally there is a significant bunching of gender equality mentions in Queen’s Speeches during the 2000-08 period, including two separate policy agendas in 2005, under Blair and Brown’s New Labour Governments, described by one feminist Minister (Tessa Jowell) as ‘the most feminist government in history’ (Ashley, 2000).

Hi: It is easier to get gender equality policies onto the policy agenda when the economy is performing well.

Our first hypothesis is that it is easier to get gender equality policies with significant economic consequences onto the policy agenda when the economy is performing well.

6 The UK has been a member of the (now) EU since 1973.
7 ‘Each member state shall during the first stage (1958-62) ensure and subsequently maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work […]’
Figure 1 shows gender policy mentions in the Queen’s Speech (with red indicating a Labour government and blue a Conservative government) and with a lagged GDP % growth line. This shows that the 1955 and 1985 gender equality policy agendas followed periods when GDP growth was contracting, both agendas are linked to legal or statutory imperatives for change. However both the 1969 Equal Pay and 1974 Sex Discrimination policy agendas came at a time immediately following a growing GDP as did the 1982, 1988 and 1994 policy agendas responding to European Court of Justice rulings. Conversely the two gaps in gender policy agendas at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1990s coincide with poor and falling GDP growth. Also showing is the consistently high and stable GDP growth occurring during the period of high gender equality policy mentions since 1997. This data shows a higher average mean score for lagged economic growth during the years with gender policy mentions compared to years with no gender policy but this difference is not significant according to a two-tailed t-test.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between gender equality policy mentions and a lagged unemployment rate since 1971. Here of note is that the gender policy mentions in speeches from the throne occurring during the 1970s and in 1988 take place following a period of falling unemployment, as do agendas set during the early Blair administration from 1999 to 2005. However three gender policy agendas timed in 1982, 1985 and 1994, coming under the Thatcher and Major administrations take place at times of rising and high unemployment. Table 1 shows these are the policies which most directly relate to ECJ judgements however and reflect a more reactive governmental stance. Again the average unemployment rate for the years which precede a gender policy mention are lower than for years where no gender policy is included in the Queen’s speech but this is also not statistically significant.

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8 Years with Gender Policy Mention – mean = 3.2071; standard deviation = 1.80020; N = 14
Years with no gender policy mention – mean = 2.3867, standard deviation = 1.73292, N = 45
P = .148

9 Reliable time series data for unemployment is not available for the years before 1971.

10 Years with Gender Policy Mention – mean = 1919.2500; standard deviation = 773.92508; N = 12
Years with no gender policy mention – mean = 2047.4800, standard deviation = 677.46440, N = 25
P = .629
Figure 3 shows the relationship between gender equality policy mentions and lagged IPSOS/MORI polling data from 1978 showing annual average % respondents giving the economy/economic situation as the most important issue (MII) to indicate public confidence in the economy. This suggests relatively high (albeit fluctuating) levels of public concern over the economy during the year preceding the 1982, 1985 and 1994 gender equality policy mentions, all prompted by ECJ rulings. The level of concern over the economy was falling in the year which led up to the 1988 and in 1999 gender equality policy agendas and remained low and stable during the policy mentions for the remainder of the New Labour Government. As with the indicators above, the average levels of public concern over the economy are lower in the years immediately predating gender policy mentions in the speech from the throne than in years where there is no gender equality policy mentions. However, this is not statistically significant\(^{11}\).

Figure 3 about here

This descriptive analysis indicates some support for our first hypothesis in that the years when gender equality policies get on the government agenda appear to follow years where economic indicators are in general more favourable than years when there are no gender equality policy mentions. This is not the case in each circumstance, in particular there are some years (1982, 1985 and 1994) when GDP growth is relatively low, and unemployment levels and public opinion on the economy as the most important issue, are relatively high. Table 1 shows these to be years when Conservative Governments announced policy agendas designed to respond to European Court of Justice rulings to amend earlier UK legislation in relation to pay and pensions and advocacy was reactive rather than proactive.

\(^{11}\) Years with Gender Policy Mention – mean = 33.489; standard deviation = 2.87; N = 10
Years with no gender policy mention – mean = 44.285, standard deviation = 2.20, N = 21
P = ..311
This is a small N study and it is not expected to find statistically significant results but the findings above suggest the relationship between economic indicators and gender equality policy agenda setting would benefit from further comparative attention. The party differences and differences in the rationale for policy change are explored in the next section examining the extent and nature of economic argumentation relating to each policy agenda.

Hii Gender equality agendas will be supported by an economic case

Our second hypothesis is that gender policy advocates adopt an economic rather than an equality frame for their arguments. To test our second hypothesis, in this section we provide a discussion of how gender equality legislation was framed, specifically about whether references were made to the economic costs and benefits of the gender equality policy under discussion. In this section we focus on the argumentation made during the eleven second reading debates using speeches from ministers and their deputies setting out the key justifications and considerations in relation to the measures proposed. The dates and broad outline of the relevant proposals of these second reading debates are set out in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that - without exception – ministerial statements address economic considerations of the costs and timing of and / or the perceived economic benefits accruing from the gender equality measures that are being proposed. The costs of proposals are addressed in seven of the eleven debates (1953, 1970, 1986, 1989, 1995, 2000 and 2005a). The costs addressed are the actuarial costs of fiscal transfers for example in measures relating to maternity pay or pensions; the costs to business of equal pay or of administering policy requirements and the costs to families of low wages or through the lack of employment opportunities for women. The timing of

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12 Of the four years when policy mentions in the speech from the throne did not result in primary legislation, oppositions day debates on the policy agenda were tabled by the Labour opposition in both 1973 and 1982 but these debates are excluded from the analysis here as the debates were more wide ranging and not related to specific proposals.
measures in relation to the general economic environment is mentioned in three speeches, as being introduced at a time of growth (1970 and 1989) and as being introduced despite adverse economic circumstances (2009).

In relation to the perceived economic benefits flowing from gender equality policies, the most commonly used economic frame which features consistently across the timeframe (1970, 1975, 1989, 2001, 2005a and 2005b, 2009) is the need to recruit or retain female human capital in order to boost micro and macroeconomic performance. Examples of the arguments in relation to the benefits for business and therefore microeconomic performance include:

‘employers are crying out for more women’s labour. A number of employers, indeed, hope that equal pay will attract more women back into the labour force, where they are so badly needed’ (Barbara Castle 1970).

‘businesses should not be deprived of highly skilled, highly trained, highly capable staff when they want to retain them’ (Alan Johnson 2005a).

‘support employers in recruiting and retaining the best people, thus keeping much needed skills and experience in the workplace’ (Gerry Sutcliffe 2005b).

Examples of the human capital argument in relation to the perceived benefits for the macro economy include:

‘the nation’s most precious asset is manpower, and it is a self-evident truth that it should with equal obviousness be applicable to women power’ (Harold Walker 1970).

‘married women […] in paid employment […] make a major contribution to our national economy […] as a nation we cannot afford to waste the skills and intelligence of over half the population’ (Shirley Summerskill 1975).
‘a nation that fails to use fully the skills and talents of more than half of its population will be competing with one hand tied behind its back’ (Norman Fowler 1989).

‘Equality is not just the birthright of every individual; it is also necessary for the economy: a competitive economy is one that draws on everyone’s talents and abilities and is not blinkered by prejudice’ (Harriet Harman 2009).


The economic framing described above in most cases runs alongside a gender equality frame arguing that proposals were good for individuals and families as well as for business and the national economy. However, the extent to which each dimension was fore-grounded varies. In some debates the gender equality rationale was stronger than the economic rationale (1975, 1999, 2001). In other debates the economic framing was particularly dominant (1970, 2005a).

One important outlier was the 1989 Employment Bill, which had an exceptionally strong economic frame about the need to remove regulatory barriers to women’s participation in the labour market. This was, however, not matched at all by an equality rationale for the reform: it was designed to deregulate the labour market and reduce the burden on employers:

‘This Bill is about the widening of employment opportunities for women and young people and the removal of unnecessary burdens on employers […] The Department of Employment stands for policies of deregulation’ (Norman Fowler 1989).
Significantly, this Bill was proposed to parliament by the neo-liberal Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, the gender equality bills brought forward under Conservative ministers (1953; 1985; 1989; 1994) exhibit very little equality framing. Instead they are predominantly responses to rulings on gender equality by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) (1982; 1985; 1994). Labour Governments (1970s and 1997--) were more inclined to balance the economic and equality cases for their proposals.

In sum, gender equality legislation brought onto the legislative agenda has a clear and consistent economic frame. What varies is the degree to which this is matched with an equality frame. This appears to depends on the economic consequences of the legislative proposal (2001 was very weak) and the political party proposing the legislation, with left-of-centre Labour Governments performing more strongly on the equality frame.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have argued for analytical and empirical attention to be paid to the economic dimension to the substantive representation of women. Although there is a ‘downstream’ literature about the impact of economic factors on gender equality (e.g. recession on women’s employment), there is no attention ‘upstream’ to how economic circumstances relate to ability of feminist advocates to get gender equality policy change on the agenda.

We argue there does appear to be some link between the likelihood of gender equality proposals getting onto the policy agenda and more favourable economic circumstances. The years immediately preceding gender equality policy mentions in the speeches from the throne have higher average GDP % growth, lower average unemployment and lower levels of public concern about the economy than years with no gender policy mentions. In highlighting this link we are not claiming a causal relationship between economic performance and gender policy agenda setting especially from a single case study with a limited number of policy proposals.
In examining Governmental argumentation supporting these gender equality policy agendas there does appear to be a clear necessity for ministers to address the economic dimension to the policy proposals. We argue that elite appreciation for the economic considerations of gender equality policies are demonstrated in the second reading debates. The speeches from ministers justify the costs to individuals, employers, business and Government as well as the benefits for the micro and macro economy. The key arguments here relate to contribution of female human capital to businesses and the national economic performance in terms of competitiveness, efficiency, productivity and growth.

What we conclude from this single country exploration of the economic determinants of gender equality agenda setting is that economic indicators are important and economic framing is essential. In examining the economic determinants of gender equality policy agendas it is also possible to identify trends and anomalies which say something about the agency and institutional determinants of gender policy change. Our analysis shows that Labour governments are more likely to bring gender equality onto the policy agenda, indicating the influence of feminist critical actors or advocates within that party. When Labour has been in power, this agency has combined with ministerial institutional capacity in the core executive. Conservative ministers have brought gender equality policy onto the agenda, despite weak economic performance and an absence of feminist advocacy, but this has predominantly been reactive agenda setting in response to imperatives from external institutional venues such as the ECJ. Thus, in highlighting the economic determinants of gender equality agendas, we argue for consideration of the compound causation of economic antecedents alongside feminist advocacy and institutional capacity. A better understanding of this relationship would be facilitated by further, comparative work.
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### Table 1 References to Gender Equality in Speeches from the Throne 1945-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Speech from the Throne and Party</th>
<th>Reference in Policy Agendas Database</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Resultant Governmental action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Nov 1952 Conservative</td>
<td>‘improving the maternity benefits of the National Insurance Scheme’</td>
<td>Review of existing scheme referred to National Insurance Advisory Committee by previous Labour Minister (Rt Hon Edith Summerskill).</td>
<td>National Insurance Bill 1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Nov 1973 Conservative</td>
<td>‘remove unfair discrimination on grounds of sex in employment and training and to widen the range of opportunities open to women’</td>
<td>Previous Anti Discrimination Private Members Bill introduced by Baroness Sear which was referred to a Lords Select Committee and then re-committed as the Sex Discrimination Bill (HL). At second reading Government announced introduction of a consultative document introduced in the Commons and Bill fell at Third Reading,</td>
<td>‘Women’s Opportunities: Government Proposals’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nov 1982 Conservative</td>
<td>‘amend the law on equal pay in the light of a recent judgment of the European Court’</td>
<td>ECJ ruling Commission v UK ECJ 61/81 1982</td>
<td>Amendment to the Equal Pay Act 1970 made via an order under Section 2 (2) of the European Communities Act 1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Main Points</td>
<td>Relevance</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Nov 1985</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>‘amend the law on sex discrimination in employment’</td>
<td>3 ECJ rulings, notably including one on differential retirement age (public sector)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Nov 1988</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>‘remove unnecessary obstacles to employment, particularly in relation to women’</td>
<td>Amendments required to Sex Discrimination Act 1975 to comply with EC Equal Treatment directive (reversing priority given to existing discriminatory legislation), and other de-regulation measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Nov 1994</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>‘equalise the state pension age between men and women’</td>
<td>Cost of future pension liabilities and ECJ ruling in Barber case on occupational pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Nov 1999</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>‘pension reforms, including the state second pension which will give more help to low earners, carers and long-term disabled people with broken work records’</td>
<td>Pension reform to provide second pension for carers and others with broken work records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 June 2001</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>‘allow political parties to make positive moves to increase the representation of women in public life’</td>
<td>Employment Tribunal case ruling Labour Party positive discrimination for women candidates at 1997 election unlawful – need for legislation to permit parties to adopt measures to reduce inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 May 2005</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>‘offer greater support for working families by extending maternity benefits and improving the provision of’</td>
<td>Measures to extend maternity and adoptions leave, requests for flexible working, help fathers play more role in care and make employers administrative duties easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Policy Statement</td>
<td>Overview</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 November 2007</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>‘help people achieve a better balance between work and family life’</td>
<td>Review of extension of right to request flexible working for parents of older children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 December 2008</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>‘promote equality, fight discrimination and introduce transparency in the workplace to help address the difference in pay between men and women’</td>
<td>Manifesto commitment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and Hansard Debates
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year from the Throne</th>
<th>Speech from the Throne</th>
<th>Date of Second Reading debate and minister</th>
<th>Economic frame</th>
<th>Key arguments made re costs and benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1952                 | National Insurance Bill 1953  
HC Deb 28 April 1953 col 1975  
Conservative Minister Osbert Peake | Yes | - Costs to mothers through loss of earnings during maternity leave ‘a proper subject for financial provision by means of national insurance’  
- Refers to actuarial cost rise of 30% |
| 1969                 | Equal Pay Bill 1970  
HC Deb 9 February 1970 col 913,  
Labour Secretary of State Barbara Castle | Yes | - Previous legislation foundered as ‘economic situation not right’  
- Estimate for equal pay will add 3 ½ % to the national bill for wages and salaries ‘something we can assimilate at a time of rising productivity’  
- Will stimulate efficiency and effect on cost of living will be marginal  
- Will boost productivity, women’s wages needed in families, employers benefit from human capital of women  
- Both equality and efficiency case |
| 1974                 | Sex Discrimination Bill 1975  
HC Deb 26 March 1975 col 511  
Labour Secretary of State Roy Jenkins | Yes | - Need for equality in employment, training, education, services etc. –  
- References to wasted human capital ‘to mobilise the skills and abilities of all our citizens’  
- Social security, pensions and taxation proposals excluded on ground of cost |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bill</th>
<th>Minister</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Sex Discrimination Bill 1986</td>
<td>Conservative Secretary of State Ken Clarke</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>- Need for equality in retirement age, working hours and training,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>HC Deb 22 May 1986 col 569</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Government aim of improving flexibility of labour market</td>
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<td>- Achievement of efficiency competitiveness and prosperity</td>
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<td>- Need for de-regulation - removal of restriction on working hours</td>
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<td>- avoid unnecessary and burdensome restrictions on enterprise</td>
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<td>- Equalisation of pension age has ‘substantial’ cost implications – not yet resolved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Employment Bill 1989</td>
<td>Conservative Secretary of State Norman Fowler</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>- Introduce employment opportunities for women and encourage de-regulation against ‘backdrop of major reduction in unemployment’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HC Deb 11 January 1989, col 853</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- New opening for women in labour market – ‘their role in the economy will need to increase’.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Discrimination is not only unfair to its victims but damaging to the economy</td>
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<td>- Waste of human capital of women</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- ‘Obligation’ under Equal Treatment Directive accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Pensions Bill [Lords] 1995</td>
<td>Conservative Secretary of State Peter Lilley</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>- ‘How to pay for pensions is the most important single issue facing every Government’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HC Deb 24 April 1995, col 525</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Legislation on equal treatment in occupational pensions schemes required to respond to the ECJ Barber case 17 May 1990.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Economic rationale for equalising state pension age at 65 – cost of equalising at age 60 would be £12 billion a year – need to balance ‘security to pensioners while not placing unsustainable burdens on future taxpayers’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Bill Title</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>Main Points</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Costing more increasing expenditure by £5 billion but most cost-effective option. |
| 2001 | Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill 2001 | Yes | - Framed as election rather than employment law  
- Mostly justice, also wasted talent argument. |
| 2005a | Work and Families Bill 2005 | Yes | - Strong economy and business framing ‘Government backs Britain’s families and Britain’s businesses, flexible working raises employment levels for the economy, widens the talent pool’  
- Human capital retention  
- Family friendly agenda has a crucial economic dimension  
- Cost to small businesses covered by Government re-imbursement, ‘We have been meticulous in trying to keep the cost of the arrangements to an absolute minimum’  
- Comparative cost of measure to support retention compared to cost of recruiting a new employee far less  
- Promotes competitiveness. |
| 2005b | Equality Bill 2005 | Yes | - Equality framing with business case as well  
- Encourages human capital. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bill/Source</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Equalities Bill 2008&lt;br&gt;HC Deb 11 May 2009, col 553&lt;br&gt;Labour Secretary of State Harriet Harman</td>
<td>Harriet Harman</td>
<td>- Strong equality and economic framing ‘equality is not just the birthright of every individual; it is necessary for the economy: a competitive economy is one that draws on everyone’s talents and abilities’ – despite global recession&lt;br&gt;- Human capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hansard Debates
Figure 1

Gender Equality Policy Agenda and Lagged GDP Growth (annual % change) 1950 - 2008

Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and ONS
Figure 2

![Gender Equality Agenda and Unemployment (lagged absolute numbers '000s) 1972 - 2008](chart)

Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and ONS
Figure 3

![Graph showing Gender Equality Agenda and Lagged Public Opinion (% reporting economy as most important issue) 1978 - 2008](image)

Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and IPSOS / MORI