

The Struggle of Benchmarking and Ranking Gender Equality: The Case of the European Institute for Gender Equality

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the conceptualisation of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing tools within European Union gender equality policymaking. In the first part, the article looks at these soft law measures applied within intergovernmental cooperation. Stemming from the extensive body of literature, the study approaches these measures as a form of scientific knowledge, which is diversely applied within policymaking. Next, the article directs various points of criticism at these policymaking tools through different variables that may hinder knowledge use. The second section of this article further focuses on the Open Method of Coordination and the role of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in relation to gender equality policies. The empirical part of this article is focused on the criticism of EIGE's External Evaluation Report and the different conceptualisations of scientific knowledge use which are presented within this audit document. As such, this article aims to contribute to a new conceptualisation of the technocratic tools of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing within the highly ideological area of gender equality policies.

KEY WORDS:

knowledge use, benchmarking, ranking, good practice sharing, gender equality policy, EIGE

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Introduction

The last two decades of the 1990s and 2000s have been particularly prolific in terms of the establishment of new European Union agencies whose aim is to provide services and conduct operations which cannot be carried out by the more traditional EU institutions (i.e. within the European Commission or the Council of the EU). The decentralisation of tasks to EU agencies also gave increased legitimacy to the creation of new “information agencies”, which differ from other organisations of this kind as their task is to provide information, communicate data and manage networks of stakeholders (von Bogdandy and von Bernstorff 2009: 1048). Such is also the case of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which officially launched its operations in 2010 and has ever since been devoting its capacities to the agenda of gender equality by providing comparable data and evidence-based advocacy. As the agency's single programming document for the years 2016–2018 clearly states, the aim of the agency is to “[...] provide high quality research and data to support better informed and evidence based decision-making by policymakers and other key stakeholders working to achieve gender equality” (EIGE 2016: 3). Within its efforts, EIGE produces benchmarks, rankings and good practices by gathering mostly statistical data, which is transformed into tangible reports and EU-wide policy analysis.

Nevertheless, the tasks and the agenda of the information agencies never appeared as simple ones. It is true that not only did an agency such as EIGE get the birth right to communicate efficiently with EU-level stakeholders, but it seems that the true problems arise when national stakeholders are approached. Benchmarking and ranking of EU Member States (EU MS) and their development with regards to gender equality seem to be thoroughly embedded in the agenda of this agency.

When exploring the application of benchmarking and rankings within various intergovernmental cooperation processes of EU Member States, the theory extensively points to various abilities which are retained by these knowledge-based tools. As we will show in this article, decades of research on the topic of knowledge use within policymaking prove that there is more to knowledge use than the conventional (instrumental)

perception. Within this contribution, we shall present the extensive body of literature on the topic of benchmarks, rankings and indicators in relation to intergovernmental cooperation. We argue that the use of social science knowledge (mostly in the form of statistics) provides various incentives which can be used by political actors. This, however, is often not acknowledged by the auditors of such complex and volatile political institutions such as the EU information agencies, who often approach knowledge use in an essential and instrumental manner. In their work, Verloo and van der Vleuten (2009) claim that the effect of reputation and performance can be better assumed in less technical and more ideological areas (e.g. gender equality). However, this nature of gender equality policies has to be taken into account when benchmarks and rankings are being scrutinised as applied tools.

For this particular reason, this article makes use of the available source – an external audit report, put together by two private consultancy companies, consisting of over 90 interviews with relevant stakeholders of EIGE. The External Evaluation Report of EIGE is used in order to look at the challenges and often denounced defects of the agency. However, the aim of this paper is also to criticise the External Evaluation Report for its deficient methodology and simple assumptions, which means the report provides only a limited view of EIGE's work.

While the title of this article, “The Struggle of Benchmarking and Ranking Gender Equality”, foresees its conclusions, it also calls on its readers to engage in some crucial reflections of the benchmarking processes. Some literature points in particular to the polity discourse of the EU bureaucracy, which seems to perceive the EU Member States actors' motivation as the main obstacle to not achieving the benchmarks set at the EU level. This discourse retains the frame that benchmarking and ranking gender equality is a worthless effort, which can only be achieved when adjusted to the motivations of national stakeholders and can be only assured with the “shadow of hierarchy”.² Yet rarely do we have the opportunity to scrutinise the measures applied and analyse the key actors' perceptions of these tools. This article provides a small ray of light onto the technical matters of benchmarking and ranking tools within gender equality policies. However,

2 The shadow of hierarchy can be described as the inability to introduce a credible threat (Saurugger and Trepan 2015: 61).

as will be clear from the outcome of this contribution to the academic literature, the area requires further elaboration, also for the sake of a managerial division of labour among EU institutions.

This article stems from the approach of discursive-sociological institutionalism, which combines the benefits of both discursive and sociological institutionalism (Lombardo and Forest 2015). As Sylvia Walby (2011) argues, EU gender equality policies need to be viewed from the perspective of political actors. Yet it is also relevant to study the discursive power dynamics connected to gender equality policymaking (van der Haar and Verloo 2016: 2).

Benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing in the context of European Union gender equality policy

A considerable amount of research has so far been produced on the topic of applying benchmarking in the public sector. Since the 1970s, when the idea of competitiveness became a routine component of the political vocabulary, benchmarking became one of the major tools applied within the New Public Management paradigm (Egeberg and Trondal 2016: 4). Stemming originally from the Japanese and American production industry and its managerial strategizing in the 1950s (Larner and Le Heron 2006: 215), benchmarking and ranking gained further importance with the rise of what Sara Ahmed (2007: 590) denounces as the “audit culture”, which views measuring and comparing performance as essential no longer only within the production cycle, but also in public administration.

Furthermore, in the 1990s, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) became a pioneer in promoting benchmarking practices and setting specific indicators for economic and social development among its member states in order to foster growth.³

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3 It is important to mention that among the first organisations which promoted the use of ranking and indexing in the context of intergovernmental cooperation was the non-governmental organisation Freedom House in 1972. The first produced index was named Freedom in the World and ranked countries worldwide based on their citizens' enjoyment of human rights (Homolar 2015: 854).

Norman Fairclough (2013) concludes that the case of benchmarking and ranking practices being adopted to help assess the effect of national and international social and economic policies can also be perceived as an example *par excellence* of the re-contextualisation of economic and business discourses within the political field. As such, the first indicators of intergovernmental cooperation were constructed within the essentially numerical area of the economy. Sanderson (2002), for example, claims that it was most notably the necessity of scientific rationality which led to the adoption of this neoliberal perception of public administration.

The academic literature on the topic of soft law measures and knowledge-based tools such as benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing applied within the policymaking of the European Union has been widely recognised. The paradigm of New Public Management (NPM) is often pronounced for its application of the performance tools for measuring and comparing used in the production industry in relation to policymaking, which began to happen in many Western countries in the 1980s. This neoliberal paradigm has also been identified by Bruno (2009), who maps it within EU policymaking and as such focuses on the adoption of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

The OMC was originally adopted with respect to social protection policies at the Lisbon summit in 2000 (Bruno, Jacquot and Mandin 2006: 525). While many perceived the adoption of this mechanism as a symbolic shift in EU policymaking, it needs to be stressed that the main features of the mechanism were inspired by the Luxembourg process of 1997 and the already functioning European Employment Strategy (Dehousse 2003: 5). Isabelle Bruno (2009) sees the 1990s as the breaking point between the traditional community method and the emerging idea of competitiveness. According to her, the aim of the proposed policymaking tool was to create harmonisation by comparing and learning through a bottom-up process. Thus, EU Member States were expected to reach the same destination by following individual paths and establishing a mutual learning process. It is therefore clear why the measures of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing happen to be referred to as the soft law tools of public policies.

Since the first talks concerning the OMC, the political strategy foresaw the adoption of guidelines and directions, qualitative and quantitative indicators, specific goals and periodical monitoring (Dale 2006: 175). The method was described as “open” due to its ability to stay decentralized, thus staying in line with the principles of subsidiarity and good governance. As Dehousse (2003) maintains, the main strengths of the newly adopted mechanism were its flexibility, decentralisation and the ability to create procedural routines fit for national objectives.

While the Lisbon Summit of 2000 foresaw the adoption of the OMC primarily within the area of social protection, the method is currently applied in other areas, such as information society, research, company policy, social policy, education, social exclusion and protection, as well as with respect to the environment (Dehousse 2003: 6). It is important to stress that gender equality policy originally developed within the antidiscrimination agenda of the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 and under the community method. Nevertheless, the methods of OMC currently also find their application within areas such as gender-based violence and gender stereotypes (Kantola 2010: 18).

The application of benchmarks and rankings for gender equality in relation to EU policies relies on guidelines and indicators developed by the Council of the EU and the European Commission. The procedure of indicator-identification can be traced back to 1998, when the Council set up the first benchmarks based on the Beijing Platform in Action⁴ (Verloo and van der Vleuten 2009: 176).

The technocratic tools of benchmarking and ranking also gained further importance after the Treaty of Lisbon and in particular with the strengthening of the position of gender mainstreaming within EU gender equality policy (Hubert and Stratigaki 2011: 173). Sylvia Walby (2011) simply assesses gender mainstreaming as the process of improving mainline policies by making visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes and outcomes. In practice, this requires sufficient and comparative data, which is then incorporated into the policymaking process. Gender mainstreaming is often perceived as a harmonious

4 Both the European Commission and the Council are currently, to a great extent, aided by one of the agencies – the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) – which will be considered in later sections of this paper.

process, which, in order to be successful, requires critical data on an organisation's particular aspects of life. According to Benschop and Verloo (2006: 22), there is an attempt to present gender mainstreaming as a de-politicised process.

Nevertheless, a new approach stemming from the notion of OMC and gender mainstreaming has been witnessed within the last decade of EU gender equality policies. This has been marked by the advent of the two waves of "agencification" in the 1990s and later in the early 2000s (Wonka and Rittberger 2010: 730). Within the second wave, information agencies such as the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) which have been devoted to providing evidence-based input into EU and EU Member States policymaking. While the two agencies are rather new, both have been particularly prolific in producing EU-wide research on the topics of fundamental rights and gender equality, which is presented as a particular form of observatory monitoring, as opposed to regulatory monitoring (Sokhi-Bulley 2011: 687). Both of these agencies are also, according to Wonka and Rittberger (2010), under greater control from EU institutions (as opposed to, for example, regulatory agencies), since their areas cover justice and home affairs, which are under closer scrutiny by the EU Member States.

The work of EIGE will be further elaborated on in the later sections of this paper. What we consider relevant within this context, at this point, is to familiarise the reader with the theoretical foundation of this paper, stemming from the (at this point) classical and extensive literature on the topic of scientific knowledge. Hereby we will also focus on the various conceptualisations of the abilities knowledge-based tools such as benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing retain within intergovernmental and national policymaking. We will thereby perceive benchmarks, rankings and good practices as a particular form of quantitative and qualitative social science knowledge which needs to be approached from the perspective of knowledge transfer within policymaking.

The use of scientific knowledge and the abilities of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing

The use of scientific knowledge has been puzzling political scientists since the adoption of the NPM paradigm. Already in 1974, Hugh Hecllo and Aaron Wildavsky (1974) argued that policy analysis should shift from its simplistic conflict-oriented perspective to the analysis of knowledge use and learning within policymaking. The attention of the scholars studying this area of political science has been mostly devoted to scrutinising political actors' use of policy analysis provided by scientific agencies, NGOs and think tanks. As Nancy Schulock (1999: 227) simply asks in her study, "If policy analysis is so rarely used, then why do we produce so much?". As the author points out, the problem with knowledge in policymaking is not that the policymakers refuse to understand its value or that the analysts do not know how to engage with the stakeholders properly. What Schulock claims to be problematic is that these actors (as well as other scholars) do not understand policy analysis for what it, according to her, is: a legitimising democratic tool, a framing instrument and a tool of bounded rationality.⁵ As such, Schulock was among the first scholars who called for the abolishment of the conventional understanding of scientific knowledge use within the production industry. However, already in 1976, Karin Knorr argued that decades of research have proven that scientific knowledge plays only a limited part in policymaking. This claim has also been supported by the American analyst of public policies Robert F. Rich, who brought a new perspective on knowledge use through his study of the US federal system. Contrary to the then popular assumption, Rich argues that within policymaking, "[knowledge] utilisation may not be necessary an outcome, but a process" (Rich 1997: 13). Within his study, Rich (1997: 12) came to a number of conclusions about the use of scientific knowledge within policymaking:

1. Information is collected for various reasons within policymaking. This does not have to necessarily include the aim to use knowledge directly (instrumentally);

⁵ Bounded rationality is explained as the use of specific tools in the form of a framework which allows political actors to achieve their preferred outcomes while staying firmly within their own preferences (Paster Florenz 2005: 147).

2. The use of knowledge may have some negative or unintended consequences;
3. It may be fully rational for the political actors to ignore the knowledge which has been provided to them.

As Caplan et al. (1975) have already pointed out, knowledge utilisation can be measured depending on how we conceptualise the use. Furthermore, within this context, Carol H. Weiss (1979) also argues that the knowledge provided by the social sciences and applied within social policy has to be approached differently than the knowledge produced by the natural sciences. This is simply because social science knowledge is not so much produced to be compelling and authoritative as to drive direct implementation, as would be the case in a highly technical area. Karin Knorr (1976) argues that the use of social science knowledge within policymaking has to a large degree been affected by an engineering model taken from the natural and technical sciences. Within this model of technical development, scientific knowledge is not expected to pose any significant dilemmas within policymaking, as it is based on objective scientific data. This, however, is often not the case for social science knowledge within the area of social and welfare policy.

Benchmarks, rankings and good practices have various aims within policymaking, as we could argue in line with Rich (1997). This is proved by a vast amount of literature which focuses on the use of these tools, in particular within the context of social and welfare policies. The literature generally provides examples of eight abilities which these knowledge-based tools attain; however, the list is not exhaustive and the area calls for further case studies.

1. Ability to transform complex social phenomena into tangible means of quantification, extrapolation and simplification (in e.g. Engle Merry 2011). Authors Bruno, Jacquot and Mandin add that “[c]oncepts such as freedom, development and democracy, which academics routinely describe as essentially contested, appear as fixed unproblematic and reified categories” (Bruno, Jacquot and Mandin 2006: 526). As such, the open concept of gender equality can be filled with tangible meanings and simple quantifications, which can be translated into simple aims. Author Stefano Golinelli also adds that

"[...] as such, indicator-based arguments cannot be easily resisted – they command deference in a way data rarely does" (Golinelli 2016: 3). Author Sokhi-Bulley (2011: 686) sees the process as the one which ultimately defines "progress". However, as opposed to this understanding of these tools, authors Plantenga and Hansen (1999) and Alexandra Homolar (2015) have been rather sceptical, since they believe that socio-economic policy can hardly be defined in terms of "input and output", as national particularities can be overshadowed by the need for simplification.

2. Ability to present information as a form of expertise. Within this context, knowledge-based tools are also perceived as a form of scientific input as the data stems from qualitative and quantitative research of the social sciences (Schrefler 2010: 309). This is often perceived as the traditional – instrumental – understanding of knowledge use within policymaking. A so-called "scientization" of social activity is particularly pronounced at the international level, where the values of rationality and universality are highly valued (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2009: 6). Already in the 1970s Karin Knorr (1976) suggested that the utilisation of scientific knowledge by policymakers is tied to an expectation that complicated political decisions will be replaced by scientifically derived objectives. Authors Broome and Quirk (2015: 6) grasped this feature and perceive it as a specific type of resource of political actors. In his study, Peter Haas (1992) also argues that the control over knowledge and information is an important dimension of power and that the diffusion of knowledge can lead to new patterns of behaviour.
3. Ability to provide policymakers with framing possibilities (Bruno 2009: 274). As such, these tools also allow particular actors to act legitimately, according to a certain kind of rationality and motivation. Authors Desmarais and Hird (2013) argue that the use of knowledge may serve some organisations, as a tool in the public justification of the chosen policy and, as such, help with the so-called ideology-planning (Knorr 1976: 11). This has been termed as the abovementioned concept of bounded rationality, which can even lead actors to shallowly adopt some policies and practices, a practice also known as "window dressing".⁶

6 Window dressing describes a situation whereby instead of assessing the real implementations, actors predominantly focus on the scorecards and the presentation of flawless numerical data (Verloo and van der Vleuten 2009: 179). The practice is sometimes also referred to as gaming (Espeland and Sauder 2007: 76).

4. Ability to create epistemic communities⁷ and networks of actors which perceive specific issues in particular ways. According to Golinelli (2016), well-established indicators of benchmarking and ranking are able to socialise actors into particular webs of meaning and discourses. As the author Renaud Dehousse concludes, “[t]he emphasis is placed on developing common interpretations of situations, common values and techniques through an interactive learning process” (Dehousse 2003: 12).
5. Ability to stimulate conversation about particular issues (Broome and Quirk 2015). Furthermore, within their work, Karin Knorr (1976) and Carol H. Weiss (1979) also point to the fact that knowledge use within policymaking can function as a form of substitution, whereby knowledge about a specific issue is produced and disseminated by the political actors in order to simulate that the problem is dealt with, while in reality, there is little happening within this area.
6. Ability to foster the transmission of particular truths. Referring to the works of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, John Morrissey (2013: 798) points to the ability of benchmarks, rankings and good practices to foster the transmission of a “normalising truth”. As tools of states’ normative self-governance in the context of intergovernmental cooperation, benchmarks and rankings are viewed as “[...] normative visions and agendas regarding what transnational actors should look like, what they should value, and how they should behave” (Broome and Quirk 2015: 9). As Peter Triantafyllou (2007) or Bruno, Jacquot and Mandin (2006) point out, benchmarking is a policymaking tool, which draws on comparisons and standardises knowledge of the governed subject. As such, the process of benchmark identification suspiciously mirrors the process of Foucauldian normalisation, which includes comparison, differentiation, hierarchisation, homogenisation and exclusion (Espeland and Sauder 2007: 72). As such, some chosen indicators of the benchmarking and ranking practice may mean preference is given to some indicators over others.
7. Ability to “name and shame” (Verloo and van der Vleuten 2009: 178). Verloo and van der Vleuten assume that the application

7 Peter Haas (1992: 2) understands epistemic communities as networks of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge.

of benchmarks and rankings in the context of intergovernmental cooperation necessarily operates with the concept of reputation, which functions as a metaphor for the implementation of particular policies. Within this context, we can again recall the works of Michel Foucault, as the states are the subjects of the international “gaze”⁸ (Foucault 1998: 173), which presents them either as those that are “doing a good job” or those that are “laggards” (Héritier 2002: 2). Wendy Larner and William Walters assume with regards to Foucault’s work on governmentality that it is the interaction with “others/other states”, which regulates the behaviour of the governed subject: “[...] by affecting, for example, their sense of good and bad conduct, what is acceptable or unacceptable in particular contexts, and so on” (Larner and Walters 2006: 20). However, this effect may have a number of negative features which are directly connected to the process of hierarchisation. As authors Broome and Quirk (2015) conclude, measuring something according to a pre-set range of indicators also creates an environment where some societal features are simply viewed as better than others. This in some cases may lead to an orientalist discourse when, for example, measuring the economic or democratic development outside of Europe or the north American context (Soki-Bully 2011: 685).

8. Ability to foster knowledge use as a form of democratic practice (James and Jorgensen 2009; Schulock 1999). Apart from the aforementioned understanding of the use of knowledge and knowledge-based tools, some of the authors also stress that knowledge may be an important factor in fostering the process of policymaking by promoting the use of scientific knowledge as a particular feature of democratic systems and their decision making.

Along with these eight abilities retained by the benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing tools, scholars have also been interested in providing a viable critique of their use within policymaking, and, as such, also look at their inabilities. This will be more directly outlined within the next section.

8 As the author wrote in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*: “[...] the precondition of applying a discipline is a disposition which coerces through the gaze: an apparatus which allows the tools of observing” (Foucault 1998: 173).

Criticism and the limits of the knowledge-based policymaking tools

As we stated in the first sections of this article, the use of benchmarking, ranking and good practice has been used in the context of intergovernmental cooperation since the first attempts piloted by the OECD and the international non-governmental sector in the 1990s. This, however, also means that scholars of political science and public policy analysts have had almost three decades to scrutinise these tools and form a critique based on their observations. Within the study of EU's OMC, questions concerning its effectiveness have been raised since the adoption of the conclusions of the Portuguese Council Presidency in 2000 (Walby 2011: 160). Furthermore, soft law tools such as benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing are constantly criticised for not producing tangible results (Lombardo and Forest 2015). As explained at the beginning, one of the aims of this study is to look at the hypothesis that this may be because of the lack of ability to conceptualise the different meanings and abilities of these tools when it comes to scientific knowledge use in policymaking.

As a crucial part of studying benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing, the interest of some authors shifted to the different barriers of policymaking, which may hinder the use of scientific knowledge provided by them. Within the perspective of Saurugger and Terpan (2016), there are various factors which may be of use when explaining the non-compliance with knowledge-based tools such as benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing. Despite the fact that the authors do not inform us about how they understand non-compliance, they spell out a number of variables with negative effects:

1. Actor-centred variables: These variables may be defined by the lack of political support for the applied measures, as well as the presence of strong (or numerous) veto players – actors whose agreement is necessary for a change in the status quo. Within this type of variable, it is also necessary to include the aforementioned questions of actors' motivations⁹ and the concept of bounded rationality. Furthermore,

⁹ Carol H. Weiss (1979: 428) also suggests that decision makers tend to view social science research through their previous beliefs.

Dale (2006) also points to the questions of agency and thus criticises these tools for being limited to the governmental experts familiar with the particular type of knowledge.¹⁰

2. Structural and actor-centred variables: These variables depend upon the political, institutional or paradigmatic structures of the national policies. As such, scholars mostly refer to these structures as generating a “misfit” between the EU and the EU Member States’ policies. Furthermore, it has already been established that the so-called misfit may be grounded not only in formal, but also in informal rules and national discourses (Havlík 2010: 250).
3. Absence of the shadow of hierarchy: The shadow of hierarchy can also be defined as the inability of EU measures to introduce a credible threat. It is therefore argued, that without viable constraint, policy learning can have only limited effect on national policies.
4. Absence of policy linkages: This variable operates with the assumption that there are no possibilities for national actors to link soft law measures to another already implemented measure. This can be perceived as a form of institutional or organisational misfit.

We can look upon the variables spelled out by Saurugger and Tarpan as a form of institutional shortage. It is clear that within their classification, the authors focus primarily on the limits of structures’ and actors’ political rationality. This particular approach is very salient with regards to the actors’ behaviour within the theories of rationalism and constructivism.

Furthermore, within the literature on the topic of scientific knowledge use in policymaking, James and Jurgensen (2009: 148) also identify the so-called informational variables, which are related to the way scientific knowledge is communicated by key actors.¹¹ It has been pointed out that in case of actors’ hostility towards these measures, it is usually the actors

10 This in essence may mean that other actors who are not familiar with the topic may find it hard to make use of the expertise presented to them. Claudio Radaelli also points out that: “the domestic policy makers involved in OMC processes are few and not pivotal in the development of domestic policy. This has something to do with the natural division of labour inside government departments” (Radaelli 2008: 250).

11 Carol H. Weiss (1979) was also among the first political scientists who highlighted that the mode of communication among policymakers is one of the core features which can foster the use of scientific knowledge within policymaking. Mitton et al. (2007) highlight the necessity that knowledge provided within policymaking be timely and also based on viable relationships among experts and decision makers. The authors’ study also suggests that dissemination strategies are a necessity in order to effectively communicate particular information in a conflict-ridden environment. Within this context, both formal and informal relations among the actors are a condition sine qua non.

themselves who are blamed, as it is a question of their motivation, thus they are deemed to be the cause of the national non-compliance. Essentially, it is still rather unusual to scrutinise the nature of the tools themselves and analyse their flaws (Bruno 2009: 277). Here we can also draw on the work of Lorna Schrefler (2010), who conceptualised the variables of scientific knowledge use in a similar manner. The author's contribution to this area rests on her perception of issue saliency and problem traceability, both of which she understood as strong factors.¹²

At this point we have presented the reader with the contemporary development of EU gender equality policies as well as the theoretical basis of knowledge-based tools and their use within policymaking. We will now proceed to put the work of the European Institute for Gender Equality within this context.

European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and its agenda

While the creation of the first EU agency devoted solely to gender equality was launched by the European Commission in 2005, the first reference can be traced back to the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU in 1999. The Council Presidency conference devoted to the topic of gender equality explicitly called for the creation of a knowledge centre which would aid in developing gender mainstreaming approaches and methodologies (Hubert and Stratigaki 2011: 171). Furthermore, in December 2000 the Nice European Council called directly for the establishment of an institution which would help Member States share experiences, enable the pooling of resources and which could help raise awareness of the topic of gender equality.¹³

12 The author understands problem traceability as the availability of scientific solutions available and known to policy makers. Issue saliency, on the other hand, is related to the question of how resonant the issue is within the political and media discourse (Schrefler 2010: 316).

13 Consequently, two feasibility studies were conducted by the European Commission (2002) and the European Parliament (2004) in order to identify the main needs of the policymaking process which could be fulfilled by the established agency.

Agnès Hubert and Maria Stratigaki (2011) claim that the objectives of this agency can be best described by the arguments which supported its inception. The authors argue that the foremost objective of the feminist experts invested in the foundations of this organisation was to provide verifiable and reliable data which would be grounded in expertise. As such, the institution would aid the process of mainstreaming gender policies at the national and EU level. While the debate over the mandate and agenda posed severe issues concerning the subsidiarity boundaries and duplicity of tasks, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) was officially established through a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council in 2006.

The Founding Regulation No. 1922/2006 of the European Parliament and the Council establishing EIGE includes provisions on the tasks which are foreseen within the agenda of the institution in relation to its stakeholders.¹⁴ It is clear from the main provisions (Article 3) that the aim of EIGE is to provide the data for the benchmarking and ranking procedures. The agency is to “[...] collect, analyse and disseminate relevant objective, comparable and reliable information as regards gender equality, including results from research and best practice communicated to it [...]” (Regulation No. 1922 2006: 11). The information is gathered from various national sources. Bal Sokhi-Bulley (2011: 700) views this as a form of panopticism, whereby EU Member States “confess” by subjecting themselves to the gaze of the experts. In order to acquire a form of standardization of data, the agency will “[...] develop methods to improve the objectivity, comparability and reliability of data at European level by establishing criteria that will improve the consistency of information [...]” (Regulation No. 1922 2006: 11). The concept of the knowledge economy is hereby also supported by the provision which allows the institute to “[...] set up and coordinate a European Network of Gender Equality, involving centres, bodies, organisations and experts dealing with gender equality and gender mainstreaming in order to support and encourage research, optimise and use of available resources and foster the exchange and dissemination of information” (Regulation No. 1922 2006: 11). Hereby, we can observe the aim of the feminist experts invested in the establishment of EIGE to foster

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14 EIGE's stakeholders include institutions and agents at the international and national level. The international stakeholders naturally include EU institutions (such as the European Commission, European Parliament, but also other agencies, United Nations or the Council of Europe). The national stakeholders are a diverse group consisting of NGOs, equality bodies, national human rights institutions, as well as relevant ministries.

the functioning of epistemic communities at the EU policymaking level, as well as at the national level. However, not only is EIGE to function as a research centre, it also retains a number of tasks which adhere to those of a think tank: “[...] in order to raise EU citizens’ awareness of gender equality, organise, with relevant stakeholders, conferences, campaigns and meetings at European level, and present the findings and conclusions to the Commission” (Regulation No. 1922 2006: 11). This would also contribute to the effort of minimising bureaucratic and political bias (EIGE 2015: 15). The tasks spelled out in the Founding regulation are linked to the necessity to “[...] ensure that the information dissemination is comprehensible to the final users” (Regulation No. 1922 2006: 12).

Four years after the adoption of the regulation, EIGE officially launched its operations. While being governed by the Management Board of EU Member States representatives, EIGE also relies on its Experts’ Forum, which functions as its advisory body. It is important to take into consideration that although the agency has been in operation for only six years, it has already managed to pilot a number of successful projects. The monitoring of the Beijing Platform in Action can be considered among the most important projects conducted so far. Since 2010 EIGE has published eight reports¹⁵ mapping the critical issues of the Beijing Platform in Action, which had been fed into the policymaking process of the Council of the EU (most notably via the work of the EPSCO Council). The agency was thus directly involved in drafting the indicators for the Council Presidencies, which establish the minimum standards with respect to achieving gender equality in a number of areas (EIGE 2016: 5). It is clear from the outline of this practice that the main aim of the set-up of the Council’s gender equality indicators is to translate complex phenomena into tangible numerical information (Broome and Quirk 2015: 7). The agency also set up an online database of Beijing indicators “Women and men in the EU”, which provides information on the indicators to the public in an interactive and comprehensive manner.

Furthermore, the agency has also invested considerable effort into establishing the Gender Equality Index, which was launched in 2013. The aim of the index is to set policy standards in six core areas (work,

15 The reports included the following topics: violence against women, gender gap in pensions, part-time work and self-employment, reconciliation of work and family life, women in power and decision making, effectiveness of institutional mechanisms, decision making in media and organisations, climate change.

money, knowledge, time, power and health) and two satellite domains (intersecting inequalities and violence). By assigning EU Member States with scores between 1 and 100 (where 1 signals total inequality and 100 signifies full equality), the index is able to create a simple ranking of how far the EU Member States have progressed on the road to equality. While the agency does not have a mandate to monitor individual EU Member States and their potential breaches of antidiscrimination legislation, the adoption of the Gender Equality Index and its normative approach may be perceived as a form of “observatory monitoring”, which functions as a new governance tool (Sokhi-Bulley 2011: 687).

Quite clearly, the dissemination of the gathered knowledge belongs to the secondary agenda of EIGE. The agency has extensive links to various national and EU organisations – including NGOs, national equality bodies and the academic community – to which it is bound by the regulation to provide technical assistance. In order to set an example, EIGE encourages national organisations and stakeholders to adopt gender mainstreaming processes via its promotion of established methods and tools (EIGE 2015: 17). Nevertheless, while the ties with EU organs such as the Council or the European Parliament are established by the regulation, the agency may find itself struggling to establish more stable formal and informal ties with the institutions present at the national level. In order to help the agency carry out its task, the agency is obliged to “[...] cooperate with organisations and experts in the Member States” (Regulation No. 1922/2006: 12). The questions concerning the efficiency of the agency are of course extensively recognised. Even the founding regulation of the organisation foresees an instrument of further evaluation when it calls for an independent external evaluation to assess the impact of EIGE.

This paper will now approach its primary aim of scrutinising the ultimate tool of organisational management – the audit report of the External Evaluation of EIGE, which was prepared by PPMI and Deloitte in 2015.¹⁶ In this section, we analyse the primary shortcomings of EIGE’s agenda, which were identified within the audit report. Further on, we focus on the recommendations given by the external consultancy companies.

¹⁶ It is important to highlight that the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, which appeared in western European countries in the 1980s and 1990s brought a variety of new principles applied within this sector (Maliková et al. 2013: 30).

The External Evaluation Report of EIGE

The establishment of the European Institute for Gender Equality by the founding regulation included a condition of an external audit assessment of the objectives and the agenda of the agency. The external audit, which was conducted by the private consultancy companies PPMI and Deloitte, was conducted five years after the official launch of the agency's operations in 2010. Its main aim was to analyse the mission and the objectives of the organisation with regards to its deliverables and outcomes. Within the report, the agency is presented as an institution aiming to become a knowledge research centre for gender equality issues:

[t]his is fulfilled through collection, interpretation and dissemination of objective, timely, reliable and comparable information [...], promotion, development and fostering of cooperation and networking, development and testing of tools, models and methods of gender mainstreaming, provision of technical assistance and best practices [...], increasing visibility for gender equality through campaigns, seminars and workshops [...]. (EIGE 2015: 4)

The aim of the External Evaluation Report is therefore to look at this agenda and assess its efficiency via an examination of the processes in place.

The data collected for the purposes of the report come from desk research of relevant documents, interviews, surveys, case studies and social network analysis. Altogether, 95 interviews were conducted with the staff of EIGE, EIGE's governing bodies, as well as national and EU-level stakeholders, staff of the European Commission, European Parliament, interest and non-governmental organisations, governmental bodies responsible for gender equality and research institutions. The report is divided into five sections,¹⁷ which are followed by the main conclusions and recommendations.

Among the main successes of the agency, the report identifies the

17 These include: Relevance and Sustainability; Governance and Efficiency; Effectiveness; Impact and Added Value; Coherence and Coordination.

Gender Equality Index (46% of the respondents), the work of the agency on the topic of gender based violence (34% of the respondents), and the Beijing Platform in Action reports and indicators (29% of the respondents). These projects are grounded in the systematic collection and processing of quantitative and qualitative social science data. Their effectiveness was identified as the ability to fill important data gaps, provide useful analysis and novel interpretations of data (EIGE 2015: 73). The networking and exchange practices of EIGE were generally assessed as not very efficient and not in line with the needs of major stakeholders. This was expressed as there being a lack of systematization and uneven production of good practices within the agency's agenda (EIGE 2015: 7).

When asked about the various ways national and EU-level stakeholders make use of the deliverables of EIGE's work, in most cases, they identified the use of the presented data in day-to-day policy making, when drafting strategies and other policy documents, as well as in informing other stakeholders about the state of gender equality development (EIGE 2015: 9). Nevertheless, stakeholders and institutions which directly work in the area of gender equality (i.e. national agencies or equality bodies) make the most use of EIGE's deliverables and are mostly aware of EIGE's work and agenda (EIGE 2015: 26). Furthermore, these actors also expect a more direct involvement of EIGE, further support and advice from the agency (EIGE 2015: 10). According to some stakeholders, the agency should be able to monitor progress and conduct gender impact assessments (EIGE 2015: 26). One of the crucial findings of the report is the fact that none of the key stakeholders who directly work within the area of gender equality questioned the importance of the agency's work and deliverables (EIGE 2015: 27). It was the group of rather distant stakeholders, such as the social partners and the media, who view EIGE's work more critically and who are not always able to see its usefulness.

In-depth analysis of the gathered data seems to be of the highest importance to the national stakeholders of EIGE. Based on the interviews with the stakeholders, the report recommends that EIGE improve its outputs and deliverables by tailoring these to the special

needs of the stakeholders: “[...] producing policy briefs based on detailed reports to increase the attractiveness and usefulness of the outputs to policymakers” (EIGE 2015: 76) It is also recommended that the agency create a feedback mechanism within its activity areas, which would directly provide the agency with information on needs and enable it to respond quickly to the changing environment (EIGE 2015: 76). This is put directly in contrast with the finding that the main obstacle, as identified by most EIGE employees and EIGE’s management bodies, was the lack of (financial and staff) resources of the agency (EIGE 2015: 10). Furthermore, while some of the enquired stakeholders requested more targeted and country-specific data, other stakeholders identified EIGE’s reports as lengthy and too technical to appeal to non-specialized audiences (EIGE 2015: 52).

Change in the political priorities of EU Member States is seen as the main concern within gender equality policymaking. Furthermore, when asked about the main struggles in promoting gender equality policies, the questioned stakeholders identified the following main issues: lack of data and monitoring, lack of involvement of men, absence of gender mainstreaming, stereotypes, lack of interest and commitment of political actors (EIGE 2015: 31). Moreover, the gender mainstreaming outputs of EIGE were identified as the least useful by the stakeholders (21%). This is identified within the report as a result of lack of awareness of these outputs among the stakeholders (EIGE 2015: 51).

To conclude the overview of the External Evaluation Report, it is important to note that this audit document lacks further analysis. A further overview of the stakeholders would be needed in order to assess the opinions of the stakeholders based on their type of institution/organization or even the EU Member State they are affiliated with. This would allow us to assess their needs and would provide us with a more detailed view of the barriers they face when promoting gender equality policies within their respective agendas.

Discussion and conclusion

The External Evaluation Report of EIGE published in 2015 and conducted by PPMI and Deloitte provides public policy scholars with interesting incentives. As an example of a valued organisational audit document, it was able to trace the signs of knowledge use among EIGE's stakeholders at the EU and national level. Conducting interviews and gathering relevant data from the involved stakeholders has proven a costly and timely endeavour in measuring the impact of knowledge use by policymakers (Staroňová 2014: 283). Nevertheless, while the report serves organisational rather than research purposes, it also proves that information can be gathered and can provide a valuable insight into the assessment of the new information agencies of the EU.

Unfortunately, the data provided by this report is not sufficient to give us a deeper insight into the knowledge use occurring at the national level. Within the first sections of this paper we have argued that the knowledge-based tools of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing attain various aims and as specific tools they also have different capabilities. This does not seem to have been taken into account by the external audit, which focused simply on the conventional (instrumental) knowledge use within policymaking and thus acknowledges the complex process of knowledge use on a limited scale. The most visible reference to the aforementioned abilities of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing is presented within the report by the European Women's Lobby (EWL). When asked about the role of EIGE in EU and national policymaking, the non-governmental umbrella organisation representatives stated that they perceive the trend and agenda-setting role of the agency to be the most crucial (EIGE 2015: 69). It is thus clear that the EWL also perceived the "framing possibilities" of the agency, which are present in Isabelle Bruno's conceptualisation of the OMC and Broome and Quirk's idea of an institution which can stimulate conversation about given issues. Furthermore, several stakeholders also identified that EIGE's main aim is to ease political and bureaucratic bias by providing clear and simple data (as reflected in ability no.1: ability to transform complex social phenomena into tangible means of quantification, extrapolation and simplification). However, we consider the simple response of most stakeholders as the

“use of the presented data in day-to-day policy making” (EIGE 2015: 9) as simply unsatisfactory. Since this shallow analysis does not provide us with answers to the core questions – i.e. what are the abilities of the benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing tools delivered by EIGE – this paper calls for further and more nuanced case studies at the EU MS level.

The overview of EIGE's deliverables seems to be the most valuable part for this paper. It is clear that various stakeholders perceive EIGE's deliverables in different ways. The ones who make use of EIGE's deliverables the most are stakeholders who work directly within the area of gender equality. These are also the actors who are the most familiar with EIGE's outputs. However, it is also clear that while some of the stakeholders want more in-depth and targeted analysis, others find EIGE's reports too technical. This set-up can prove particularly problematic within national structural settings and raise the question of who the target national stakeholders of EIGE are. It is clear that the deliverables of EIGE are most easily grasped by actors working within the gender equality epistemic communities. On the other hand, actors who are not directly engaged with gender equality policies find these tools harder to grasp. This supports Dale's claim (2006: 175) that the tools of benchmarking and ranking limit themselves within the expert groups of national administrations, who then find it difficult to communicate them to others – the less-aware stakeholders. We believe this may be one of the reasons why less engaged stakeholders (such as social partners and the media) approach EIGE's tools more critically. This brings us to one of the structural and actor-centred variables and questions of the theoretical part of this paper: Who are the actors involved with benchmarking and ranking tools at the national level and is their engagement enough to cause policy change at the national level?

Another incentive of the audit report is the analysis of the stakeholders' perception of the issues which hinder the gender equality policies. The majority of stakeholders identified these as informational variables (lack of data and monitoring), actor-centred variables (lack of involvement of men, lack of interest and commitment of political actors) and structural variables (absence of gender mainstreaming) (EIGE 2015: 31). This needs to be taken into account when criticizing the tools of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing promoted by EIGE. This is also due to

the fact that the agency is at this point working on its own ability to open its own windows of opportunity.

The next question raised with regards to the application of soft law tools within gender equality policymaking is the usage of good practices. It is estimated within the report that national stakeholders rarely make use of EIGE's collection of good practices. This was explained as a product of a lack of systematic promotion by the agency. Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed that EIGE has developed an interactive online tool where visitors to the website can search through various good practices, which are divided according to specific criteria. This leads us to question, not the promotion of EIGE's projects, but rather the interest of national stakeholders. We can assume, as Adriene Héritier (2002) does, that if the application of measures such as good practices were not costly in the first place, it would have occurred already. Therefore, we can assume that while the promotion and adoption of good practices seems to be a soft law measure *par excellence*, it turns out to be rather costly for national actors. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the application of EIGE's collected good practices by national stakeholders requires further assessment and would benefit from being the object of further studies.

The focus of the report on the instrumental use of knowledge within policymaking also provides us with one more crucial incentive. Within the report, social science knowledge and the tools of benchmarking, ranking and good practice sharing are approached as a form of technical data which should be used instrumentally by key stakeholders. This assumption ignores the works of the aforementioned Carol Weiss (1979), who claims that within social and welfare policymaking, social science knowledge proves more problematic than the simple knowledge of natural sciences. The logic of the external audit also ignores the works of Robert F. Rich (1997), who claims that scientific knowledge may not only have different aims in the context of policymaking, it may also be perfectly rational for actors not to make use of this knowledge.

The mosaic of this complex issue is also obscured by the particular nature of the policymaking area. Gender equality policies are an area of policymaking which is understood as highly ideological (Verloo and van der Vleuten 2009: 179), yet since numerical data conveys the aura

of complete scientific objectivity, it is expected that the scientific data within this area will be perfectly technocratic and depoliticised. This is of course a false assumption, as we have already pointed out in relation to ability no. 6 – to foster the transmission of particular truths. As John Morrissey (2013: 803) writes, the process of identifying indicators is highly political, as it prefers some practices over others and creates a form of normalisation. As Verloo and van der Vleuten (2009: 181) write, “[...] what is not measured, does not exist”.

It is clear that the efficient and constructive criticism of EU gender equality policies requires a new perspective in the new era. Furthermore, it is also apparent that the simple assumption that the work of EU information agencies is not efficient is not grounded in a nuanced and case study approach. The institutions fostering gender equality policies at the EU and national level have to be aware of the complexities of scientific knowledge use, in particular within the area of gender equality policymaking, which proves rather conflict-ridden for a number of EU Member States.

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