Toward the Systematic Study of Feminist Policy in Practice: An Essential First Step

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Toward the Systematic Study of Feminist Policy in Practice: An Essential First Step

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ABSTRACT
This article proposes an analytical construct, based on feminist and non-feminist policy studies, to be eventually used in the systematic study of feminist policy in practice in postindustrial democracies. The measurement allows for the analysis of democracy, representation, and symbolic reform in terms of the array of policy actors who come forward during the crucial implementation and evaluation stages, the policy instruments that are used in these phases, and policy outcomes. As the article argues, developing this analytical measurement constitutes the essential first step in the emerging research cycle on feminist policy postadoption in a comparative perspective.

KEYWORDS
implementation; feminist policy; gender equality policy

Introduction
With more than forty years of government action in postindustrial democracies that has explicitly promoted women’s rights and gender equality, it is important to take stock of whether and to what degree the multifaceted, transversal, and highly complex policies that put into place feminist demands have actually achieved those goals in practice through implementation, evaluation, and outcomes. Simply put, does feminist policy matter? Answering this question is essential to our understanding of how contemporary democracies have represented women’s interests, in their full complexity: “descriptively” (Pitkin 1967) through bringing women into the policy process and “substantively” through bringing principles of gender equality into the content of policies and their processes that go beyond “purely symbolic politics” (Edelman 1964) to concretely reduce gender-based inequities in society. Studying the practice of feminist policy, therefore, provides crucial insights into the critical processes of democracy and democratic performance.

Despite the development of complex policy tools and expertise for gender equality policy assessment and a highly active and successful community of scholars engaged in the comparative study of feminist policy, little work has systematically studied whether, how, and why this full range of feminist
government action in postindustrial democracies has actually achieved the complex goals of gender equality. Moreover, three generations of policy implementation research outside of a feminist purview have basically ignored gender equality policy as an analytical terrain as well as the significant body of scholarly work that has studied it. Nonetheless, both areas of scholarship have important analytical insights about the study of feminist policy in practice.

The goal of this article is to draw on these two often disparate bodies of work to propose an analytical construct to study whether feminist policies in practice actually matter in Western postindustrial democracies. As this article argues, combining feminist and non-feminist work to develop a systematic approach to studying feminist policy in practice addresses weaknesses in each area of scholarship and has the potential to promote more solid empirical analysis and theory building about feminist policy postadoption as well as about policy formation in other sectors. The proposed conceptual measurement is designed to assess whether feminist policies after they have been formally made go beyond “symbolic reform” (Edelman 1964) to entail concrete practices and policies with teeth and real authority that effectively promote gender equality throughout society and, in doing so, enhance women’s representation descriptively and substantively, in the context of the full intersectional complexity of women’s interests (Schwindt-Bayer and Taylor Robinson 2011). This article, therefore, takes an initial and arguably essential first step in the broader research cycle on feminist policy formation that is just now turning its attention to the study of the practice of gender equality policy: the proposal of an analytical tool that may be used and further developed in future studies of feminist policy in practice.²

The case for systematically studying feminist policy postadoption is made in the first part of the article. Next, the contributions and gaps in feminist policy and non-feminist implementation studies are examined. Building from the lessons learned in these two areas of work, the analytical construct for studying feminist policy postadoption is then presented. The conclusion suggests the next steps to be considered to move the emerging research agenda on feminist policy in practice forward.

The case for the systematic study of feminist policy in practice

As assessments of research on gender and policymaking have shown (e.g., Blofield and Haas 2013; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013; Mazur 2002), Western postindustrial democratic governments since the early 1970s have adopted a dizzying number of explicitly feminist policies across a broad range of policy sectors.³ Gender mainstreaming policies that seek to systematically insert gender equality across all sectors of government action have also been actively pursued since the late 1990s in Western democracies, particularly in Western Europe through the impetus of the European Union (e.g., Lindholm 2012; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013).
Increasingly, many feminist policies have brought in other vectors of inequality based on, for example, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and/or age, through an “intersectional” (Krizsan, Skeije, and Squires 2012; Weldon 2008) approach and “gender+” (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013) policies. Governments at the national and international levels as well as nongovernmental groups and individual gender experts have developed and used sophisticated tools for implementing and assessing impacts of gender equality policy; to name a few, gender audits, gender budgeting, gender impact assessments, gender performance indicators, gender equality indexes, and gender training (Blofield and Haas 2013; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; 2013; Walby 2009).

As Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) first showed in the case of environmental policy in Berkeley, California, in the early 1970s and students of policy implementation have asserted since, what occurs after a policy is formally adopted by government can short-circuit the original intent of the formal policy statement. Given the extent to which feminist policies inherently seek to challenge the status quo of gender relations, this caveat about implementation is even more applicable. Feminist studies have shown that governments may not seek to actively and authoritatively implement such controversial policies that challenge long-held established patterns of behavior on the part of the powerful; rather, they may systematically pursue “symbolic” (Edelman 1964) measures, formal policy statements, with no “policy outputs” or results (Cobb and Elder 1983, 22). As a consequence, for practitioners, activists, and scholars interested in determining whether these highly complex and often contentious feminist policies and instruments actually promote women’s rights and gender equality, the stages of feminist policy development after the formal decision must be assessed (e.g., Blofield and Haas 2013; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013; Mazur and Pollock 2009). Moreover, common and clear standards for success and failure need to be developed, including attention to policy outcomes and impacts as well as formal programmatic outputs.

Developing an approach and conceptual tools, based on both feminist and non-feminist policy studies, to systematically study feminist policy in practice will allow analysts to formally assess whether the accumulation of this wide and complex array of feminist policies has actually achieved the general goals of gender equality and feminism. In doing so, it will also enhance our understanding of the dynamics of successful feminist and gender equality+ policies and suggest how to design more successful policies, when policies fall short. Such a systematic focus on postadoption will also more generally allow an assessment of whether governments in postindustrial democracies have actually responded to demands for gender justice and equality, whether inequities between the sexes have been reduced, and hence whether substantive and descriptive representation
have been enhanced. Moreover, building a conceptual tool based on the strengths and addressing the weakness of both feminist and non-feminist policy studies means that the empirical studies that come out of this approach have the potential to strengthen both areas by creating a constructive dialog between the two areas. Thus, being systematic about studying postadoption addresses policy-oriented questions of design and best practices as well as more theoretical questions of democratic performance, governance, and inclusion that place gender politics at the center of democratic processes.

**Feminist policy studies: The turn towards feminist policy in practice**

Many feminist policy analysts have made calls to focus on the thorny and complex phases that occur after a policy is adopted: implementation, evaluation, and the assessment of outcomes and impact (Blofield and Haas 2013; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013; Mazur 2009; Mazur and Pollock 2009). Moreover, some of the early literature on gender and development looked at the design, implementation, and impact of development policies to generate better policy assessment tools and eventually better policies (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013, 656). Different aspects of these postadoption phases have been studied in Western postindustrial democracies, but those studies are not representative of the bulk of studies of feminist policy formation. As reviews of work on feminist policymaking assert, these postadoption stages have not been on the feminist policy studies agenda until recently (Blofield and Haas 2013; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2013; Mazur and Pollock 2009). An assessment of nine recent international research projects on feminist policy issues, for example, shows that none of the projects focused on implementation or impact evaluation (Mazur 2009). Rather the agenda-setting and adoption phases of policy formation were examined with a particular focus on the content of policies, policy debates, issue framing, and problem definition with few connections to the crucial phases of postadoption (e.g., Ferree et al. 2002; Kantola 2010; Lombardo and Forest 2012; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; McBride and Mazur 2010; Weldon 2011). Thus, as Blofield and Haas (2013) state,

> While scholars have identified distinct patterns in types of government policies, more research is needed that links different policy frames to their adoption, implementation and outcomes. (694)

Recent research that does focus on postadoption primarily examines administrative outputs, seldom providing the details of the “practice” (Montoya 2013) of state and non-state actors in implementation and evaluation. Similarly, the question of the impact of policies is often left out of the
implementation equation. Some notable examples illustrate this point. Zippel
(2006) looks at the degree to which employers in Germany and the United
States put into practice new sexual harassment regulation. Van Der Vleuten
(2007) assesses how European Union (EU) member states “implement” EU
directives in national laws. Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2009) study how
gender mainstreaming is put into place in EU government in administrative
regulations or “outputs.” Krook (2009) focuses on the implementation of
quotas across the globe. Mazur assesses the implementation and evaluation of
equal employment policy in France, the United States, and Great Britain
(1995) and the implementation of feminist policies in postindustrial democ-
racies (2002). Montoya (2013) studies violence against women policies in the
EU through primarily examining administrative outputs and interest group
activities at the EU, national, and local levels.

Policy impact has been the major focus of the gender and welfare state
literature in feminist policy studies as well as feminist studies in economics
and sociology. These studies often look at aggregate outcomes in isolation
from the specifics of the policy process or at the details of policy implemen-
tation (e.g., Sainsbury 2008). More recent feminist social policy studies have
brought in specific political actors (Morgan 2009) and specific aspects of
child care programs (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh 2012) to assess the determi-
nants of national level social policy.

There is increasing attention to assessing the impact and results of policy
alongside the complex process of implementation at the “street level,” includ-
ing French work on parity, equal employment, and violence policies (Mazur
and Revillard forthcoming) and research on gender mainstreaming in Sweden
(Callerstig 2014; Lindholm 2012). A growing literature on gender expertise
and training has also provided important information about how gender
equality policies have been put into action (Hoard 2015; Lindholm 2012;
Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). Work on domestic violence policy in
the United States has also turned its attention to postadoption (Stark 2009).
Official government reports and studies of women’s groups conduct impact
assessments of gender equality policies over time as well, although often in
isolation from the scholarly literature on feminist policy. Work on gender
quotas worldwide, an important feminist policy, has also begun to tackle the
complex connections between policy content, implementation, and impact
(Krook et al. 2012). Feminist theory on the representation of women’s interests
in Pitkin’s (1967) taxonomy of substantive and descriptive representation has
also been putting how women’s interests are substantively represented in
processes of implementation on its analytical radar (Celis 2012).

It is clear that one of the major reasons feminist policy studies are just now
turning to the postadoption phases is that gender equality policies were only
placed on government agendas beginning in the early 1970s, and some of the
more developed policies, such as gender mainstreaming, were not put on the
books until the late 1990s. We now have a significant amount of time that has gone by to make assessing implementation and outcomes meaningful in the degree to which these new policies have actually changed gender relations and equality between the sexes. Thus, this shift in analytical focus is part of the research cycle in feminist policy studies that first began by assessing how feminist policy issues were placed on government agendas and formulated into laws and policy decisions. Another reason for the lack of attention to implementation practices is the time-consuming and costly nature of investigating the specific activities of policy actors, particularly in comparative cross-national studies that include many countries or in multilevel studies in the European Union where practices need to be studied at the EU, national, subnational, and local levels. At the same time, aggregate indicators of outputs, such as regulations, administrative offices, and training programs, may not capture what really is happening in implementation, which is a messy business involving a broad range of “stakeholders”—compliant groups, administrative actors, target groups, watchdog groups, and individual citizens. However, the time is worth it to produce valid findings that actually reflect what is happening on the ground and hence whether policies are being authoritatively pursued after adoption.

A final obstacle to the systematic study of feminist policy in practice is how to develop a valid and reliable measurement of policy success. Here, standards of what is considered feminist policy success must be discussed and raised—an issue of potential disagreement given the contested nature of feminist politics in many circles. As Blofield and Haas (2013) assert,

Even when there is agreement about the existence of a particular form of gender inequality, disagreements inevitably arise over the appropriateness and feasibility of possible policy solutions. (678)

Indeed, many of the analyses of feminist policy that focus on discourse are premised on the notion that there are conflicting views and frames over the goals and outcomes of feminist government action (e.g., Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; McBride and Mazur 2010; Walby 2009). In many cases, as Anderson (2006) and others have shown for all areas of policy, policy goals themselves may not be clear; hence, it may be difficult to identify success in the intent of the original policy. In addition, it is not always clear whether a change in gender relations or women’s status is actually a result of the policy; the reduction of gender-based differences may very well be the result of other factors unrelated to the policy—what Anderson (2006) calls the “difficulty of determining causality.”

Thus, the proposal being made here is a part of this feminist turn to studying the complex postadoption phases. The analytical construct allows for a detailed actor-based analysis of all of the stages of postadoption alongside an assessment of policy impact and outcomes that includes a
focus on women’s representation within the context of the challenges of identifying accurate measurements and indicators of successful gender equality outcomes.

**Non-feminist policy studies: Theorizing democratic implementation processes without gender**

Clearly, non-feminist policy implementation studies provide an important touchstone for developing a systematic approach to feminist postadoption. The general policy process approach that underpins the analytical construct proposed here initially came from US-based policy scholarship (e.g., Anderson 2006). Much of the feminist policy studies literature uses this process approach as well. For instance, Blofield and Haas (2013) in their review of feminist policy work identify four stages of the policy process: “issue framing, policy adoption, implementation and policy outcomes.” Similarly, the differentiation drawn between outputs—“visible measures of government activity” (Dye 1992, 354 cited in Blofield and Haas 2013, 691)—and outcomes—“changes in society that are associated with measures of government activity” (Dye 1992, 35 cited in Blofield and Hass 2013, 693)—is central to any understanding of feminist postadoption processes.

A rich literature on policy implementation since the early 1970s also brings insights and concepts that are useful for studying feminist policy in practice. Despite assertions that policy implementation studies were dead after their heyday in the 1980s, scholars of policy implementation more recently have asserted this field is “very much alive and relevant” (Saetren 2005; 2011). They argue that European implementation scholars have made important recent contributions (O’Toole 2000). Matland’s 1995 review of the policy implementation scholarship identifies a major division between the “top-down” and “bottom-up” schools. Top-down approaches focus on how centrally located administrative actors carry out the goals of the original policy through enforcement on the target group. The bottom-up approach locates policy implementation at a more local, decentralized level where services are delivered and the concern is with the lower level policy actors that are administering the policy, the target populations, and the full range of stakeholders. Matland (1995) proposes an alternative to the two “models,” the “ambiguity-conflict” model, which accounts for the highly contingent and controversial nature of policy implementation and is highly context specific, which resonates strongly with the contested nature of feminist policies discussed above.

De Leon and De Leon (2002) argue that policy implementation studies need to focus on the bottom-up part of implementation that emphasizes more democratic processes and the understanding that policy implementation should be accountable to the public with full participation. Such a shift, they assert, will bring a renaissance in policy implementation studies that will
return it to its original vigor in the United States. Fischer (2012) and others also have emphasized the importance of more bottom-up processes in examining the policy process in terms of “deliberative democracy” and of discourse and argumentation, similar to the “discursive turn” in many feminist policy studies. This focus on democracy and top-down versus bottom-up approaches to implementation also resonates with the feminist turn toward the study of postadoption.

Despite these connections, this implementation literature does not mention gender policy or the feminist scholarship that studies it. Saetren’s reviews of the implementation literature in 2005 and 2011, which identify the vitality of implementation studies across 7,800 articles, books, chapters, and PhD dissertations, does not classify the articles by gender. The substantive categories he uses to classify the literature do not include a separate gender category but only health, education, law, environment, and economics, and there is no evidence that any gender specific policy studies were classified. Overviews of feminist policy analysis also point to this near silence on gender in non-feminist policy studies (e.g., Mazur and Hoard 2014). Given the extent to which gender is ignored by policy implementation research, the analytical tools and theories coming out of these studies may only be partially valid. Indeed, there are many lessons to be learned for non-feminist implementation studies from studying the case of gender equality policy and the work on feminist policy scholarship, particularly given the degree to which much of the feminist policy work has used concepts and theories from the non-feminist literature and the complex challenges of policy implementation faced by gender equality policy, generally speaking.

**Measuring feminist policy in practice: Symbolic reform, representation, and democracy**

The analytical construct developed and presented in this section draws on lessons shared by feminist and non-feminist policy studies. In adapting concepts that have already been used in both areas of research, this proposed approach produces a more valid and reliable tool of analysis and in doing so will better integrate these two disparate areas of work as well as strengthen them to produce more systematic studies in both areas, particularly given the degree to which non-feminist implementation studies have virtually ignored gender equality policy and feminist policy scholarship. The construct focuses on the policy actors that come forward and policy instruments used in the policy processes that unfold after the adoption of a formal policy. Its goal is to assess whether these complex processes lead to policy success or failure, defined in achieving concrete and meaningful, rather than symbolic, reforms that represent women substantively and descriptively—in other words, whether feminist policies are enhancing democratic performance.
This construct can potentially be used at all levels of analysis: individual policy decisions, a set of more general policy decisions, the policy sector as well as the local, subnational, national, or international levels. It is intended to be used in the analysis of single discrete cases as well as in larger “n” analyses of feminist policy in practice across countries and sectors. Rather than necessarily using the original formal content of the policy in question as the benchmark to assess success and failure, broader standards for feminist success are presented in women’s enhanced substantive and descriptive representation and the promotion of authoritative policies that effectively produce gender equality in society, although it is important to identify the original content of the policy as an analytical touchstone, and in many cases it may be an important factor in the actual success or failure of the policy. This construct is also designed to assess gender equality+ policies, those that combine gender equality with other areas of inequality. It is assumed here that while feminist policies may include gender equality+ policies, not all feminist policies take this intersectional approach. Rather, whether feminist policy incorporates these other vectors of inequality is a question for research.

Although this conceptualization of feminist postadoption seeks to propose a systematic roadmap, it does not provide a simple parsimonious understanding of feminist policy in practice. Rather, it furnishes a menu of options from which researchers may choose, depending on the research context—theory building, scholarly, impact assessment, action oriented, etc.—and on the resources for conducting research. As Goertz (2006) and others who work on conceptualization show, the research context is important in determining how a concept will be operationalized and specifically used in measurement.

Figure 1 presents this analytical tool that allows for the examination of the three phases of postadoption in substantive and descriptive representation (SR/DR), of the five dimensions of success in implementation and evaluation and of top-down and bottom-up approaches for each phase. Here, the different stages are first presented. Next, the potential measurements of policy success in each stage are discussed. Then, a more aggregate measurement for policy success is proposed on the basis of the notion of symbolic reform.

It is important for feminist and non-feminist studies alike to be precise about the different stages of the postadoption process. As O’Toole (2000) points out, studies of “implementation” often include the act of carrying out policy and the analysis of its effects and results or “impact assessment” (266). Here, the political processes of implementation and evaluation are clearly differentiated from the actual outcomes of the policy process, which may be the object of the evaluation process. Outcomes may also be used by individuals not active in that particular policy process—citizens, scholars, and activists—as potential indicators of success for a particular policy.
Implementation is the policy phase where state and non-state actors carry out policy decisions through a wide range of activities or “outputs” and “practice,” concepts developed by feminist and non-feminist work (e.g., Blofield and Haas 2013; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2009; Krook 2009; Mazur 1995; Montoya 2013; Van Der Vleuten 2007; Zippel 2006). For example, Anderson (2006) identifies “rule-making, adjudication, law enforcement and program operations.” As these studies have shown, implementation involves administrative actors, compliance groups, courts and criminal justice systems, and target populations. As such, this stage brings forward a complex constellation of actors, or “stakeholders,” that tend to vary by the type or sector of policy (Htun and Weldon 2012; McBride and Mazur 2010) and the territorial level of implementation from national, to subnational, to more local “street-level” implementation (Matland 1995).

Evaluation is a separate process that is often carried out by the same set of implementation actors. Maria Bustelo (2017), in this volume, provides additional valuable insights about this process from a feminist perspective. It involves formal and informal assessments of whether a given policy was successful, big “E” and small “e” evaluation. Big E evaluation can be both “summative” and “formative” as well (Anderson 2006). Formal summative and formative evaluations can be built into policies from their inception, often by the legislature or by requirements from extra national government organizations, such as the EU or the United Nations (UN). Small e evaluation usually is conducted by nongovernmental organizations but also sector-specific agencies, such as women’s policy agencies, as a part of the watchdog process to monitor whether governments are following through on political promises. As such, policy evaluation is a crucial part of democracy’s critical
processes; it can make government accountable to voters and citizens. Evaluation also may lead to important changes in policy and placing issues back on government agendas. Given the prevalence of formative evaluation, implementation and evaluation may occur concurrently; thus, they are not necessarily sequential processes, although formal summative evaluations can occur after programs have been implemented. In addition, it is important to note the often marginal position of evaluators (i.e., policy experts) to the process and the degree to which policy evaluations, particularly if they are formal program evaluations, can reflect more the political goals of the group/institution that commissioned them than an overall objective evaluation (Anderson 2006). As such, researchers studying the policy evaluation process need to identify the “positionality” of the evaluator in the political process (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009).

As the non-feminist policy literature first asserted and feminist work has taken up (Blofield and Haas 2013), outputs, observable government action, are not the same as outcomes of policies. Here, outcomes are clearly separated out in three different potential types: direct, indirect, and feedback. The type of outcome that is analyzed depends on the context and the goals of the assessment, that is, whether it is being used in the evaluation process of a given policy by the policy actors or whether researchers outside of the policy process are attempting to determine the success of the policy. Direct outcomes involve the impact of the policy on the target group or problem identified in the original policy. An essential part of determining direct impact is whether the original problem identified by the policy was solved or a specific goal was met, but also whether the demands of the groups and individuals who requested the policy in the first place were met. Indirect outcomes include long-term changes in public opinion, norms, values, and attitudes, potentially operationalized by a series of indicators like public opinion, polls, or voting patterns; what Inglehart (1990) and others have referred to as “culture shift.” There are also unintended consequences or “diffuse policy impacts” (Anderson 2006, 272) that may harm other groups. In feminist policy it is clear that men as a group may become the unintended losers in feminist policy formation; this may be an important indicator of success or failure, depending on the analyst’s perspective.

**A menu of options for measuring success**

The five dimensions of postadoption presented in Figure 1—outputs, practice, institutional feedback, accountability, and responsiveness—provide the building blocks to assess policy success and failure. Outputs are differentiated from practice (Montoya 2013) in implementation and evaluation. That is, just because government programs, structures, instruments, and funding were established does not necessarily mean that there will be follow-through.
Thus, researchers need to identify the administrative outputs that were established to implement and evaluate policy and then determine whether the various policy actors actually did anything in practice. Identifying outputs AND practice is particularly important in feminist policy formation where elected officials may be willing to sign off on a policy that promotes gender equality, establish mechanisms to implement and evaluate, but less supportive of the potential politically costly process of putting into action those policy instruments. Therefore, promoting “concrete” activities, rather than “symbolic” gestures, may take more political will and bottom-up pressure than just setting up administrative machinery (Anderson 2006; Edelman 1964; Mazur 1995).

Identifying institutional feedback on a given policy decision is another means of determining whether a policy goes beyond symbolic reform (Mazur 1995; Skocpol 1992). Here, the bottom-up and top-down approaches are combined. It is important to examine the range of actors that comes forward to mobilize around implementation across all of the stakeholders, state and non-state actors, implementers, legal actors, compliant groups, and target groups. The institutional feedback component indicates whether there is follow-through on the formal outputs that are set up. Although higher levels of institutional feedback do not necessarily mean policy success, compliant groups like businesses also can be active in the process to block implementation. Descriptive representation can also be determined in the institutional feedback dimension of postadoption where formerly excluded groups have the potential to be included in the process—in feminist policy groups and actors who speak for women’s interests. Feedbacks can be identified in evaluation and implementation processes and can also be used as indicators of success for the outcome of a policy through policy change, new networks and policy actors, and new mechanisms to make the process accountable. Similarly, the development of new networks and groups in the processes of implementation and evaluation can indicate that a policy has enhanced representation of women’s interests.

The notions of accountability and policy responsiveness, coming from feminist and non-feminist democratic theory (Celis 2012) and work on deliberative democracy (Fischer 2012), are also potentially crucial dimensions of assessing feminist policy success. Here, the democratic context for policy adoption is fundamental; policy processes and actors need to be accountable to the public and constituencies that are represented in that policy. Thus, policy implementation and evaluation is not just a top-down administrative procedure removed from the political realm; it is actually an object of contestation and deliberation in the full messiness of the democratic process. This is where Schattschneider’s (1960) notion that policy is the result of the struggle over meaning comes to the fore. Feminist policy work that focuses
the definition of meaning echoes this earlier non-feminist caveat (e.g., Lombardo and Forest 2012; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). In such a deliberative process, different groups will come forward and express their interests; in feminist policy it is important to develop mechanisms that ensure that the demands for women’s rights and change in gender relations are met and responded to. Women’s policy agencies, government agencies set up to advance women’s rights, are potential accountability mechanisms, but the emphasis here is on meaningful accountability. Thus, representatives in the process need to be in touch with constituency interests and demands, often coming from women’s movement actors, and then the process must ensure that these voices are heard and responded to. The responsiveness to feminist and women’s movement demands is the outcome of this deliberative and accountable process; often the “policy discourse” used is an indicator of that outcome (Lombardo and Forest 2012; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). Researchers can then determine whether the policy process reflects the target group/women’s movement demands—in other words, whether women’s interests were substantively represented.

An aggregate measure for success: The symbolic-concrete continuum

The general success of a given policy across the three different stages using the five dimensions of success (outputs, practice, institutional feedback, accountability, and responsiveness) can be measured in terms of a continuum of symbolic versus concrete (authoritative or material) reform.7 The concepts are treated as ideal types at each end of the continuum, and individual cases of postadoption may be lined up in between them or in ratio variable form on a given scale with 0 being the most symbolic and 10, for example, the most concrete. An ideal type of symbolic postadoption might include outputs alone on evaluation and implementation, no practice and hence no feedback, accountability or responsiveness, or even outcomes. An ideal type of concrete or authoritative policy would be high levels of outputs and follow-through, with meaningful accountability mechanisms, responsiveness, and institutional feedback in implementation and evaluation, and clear direct and indirect results that show improvement in the targeted problem and long-term change in attitudes and enhanced participation in the process. Of course, there could be different authoritative outcomes, depending on the content and starting point of the original policy. For example, a concrete outcome could be the redesign of a new policy. This continuum could be used to analyze individual policy cases first of the actor oriented construct and to compare them across countries and sectors, eventually developing a coding system that would allow for large “n” cross-national and/or cross-sectoral analysis and more qualitative case-by-case analyses.
In this context the postadoption process is looked at in its entirety, and in fact, it is important to do so from a scholarly perspective of systematically answering the question of whether feminist policy matters. Examining policy implementation and evaluation alone would not necessarily produce the same results as studying the processes and their outcomes. At the same time, researchers, depending on the research context, may choose to look at one stage of the policy process—just the outcomes, for instance—or focus on one or a combination of indicators for success: accountability mechanisms, responsiveness, or representation. Another issue to be considered is the indicators used for success, particularly for the accountability and responsiveness dimensions in the two processes. Given the full diversity of women’s interests, researchers need to be watchful about which interests and demands for which groups of women, based on class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., are being used to determine policy responsiveness and overall success, particularly given the debate over gender equality among feminist actors themselves.

The selection of indicators for the success of policy outcomes will be crucial in producing valid and reliable results as well. The question of whether the policy outcome responded to the goals of the original policy is very different from whether the policy responded to feminist demands expressed in the process of policy formation, particularly given formal feminist policy tends to dilute the original demands of women’s groups (Mazur 2002). In addition, the origin of the impact indicators needs to be clearly stated as well: are they from politicized sources or more independent and reliable sources? How are they constructed? Are they comparable across different contexts? These are just some of the questions researchers need to answer as they are selecting indicators for assessing the impact of policies. It is important to keep in mind feminist standards for success in what feminist groups were asking for and also what feminist experts and scholars determine as successful outcomes and results, particularly when thinking about assessing the impact of feminist policies. Moreover, in this approach, if this aggregate measure is being used, outcomes are not the only indicator of success; they also are evaluated in terms of the five dimensions of each of the two phases.

**Conclusion and next steps**

In many ways this is a modest proposal. It advances a way of analyzing feminist policy adoption in the three stages and the five elements of success and failure without actually applying it in specific cases of empirical analysis. The question of what the determinants or drivers of successful feminist policy in practice are has not even been raised. At the same time the construct proposed here builds from empirical lessons learned from both feminist and non-feminist policy analyses to better integrate these two areas
of work, in particular the non-feminist scholarship that has essentially ignored feminist policy analysis. The analytical approach developed here, therefore, will hopefully be systematic, valid, and reliable in its empirical application and will strengthen both areas of scholarship. It will allow feminist policy studies to move forward its research agenda to answer the question of whether feminist policy matters in practice. For non-feminist studies it will formally place gender into the context of theory building about implementation and provide a new and arguably more complete analytical tool to examine non-feminist policies. This approach places democracy and representation at the center of analysis and, from that, suggests a way to assess feminist policy failure and success in broader standards of gender equality based on descriptive and substantive representation and symbolic reform through a focus on actors that come forward and on instruments used in the complex processes that follow policy adoption. It places equality + policies front and center by clearly defining them as a part of feminist policies more broadly speaking and more specifically showing how the complex intersectional nature of women’s interests need to be considered in all the different parts of assessing whether feminist policies have been successful in practice. It does not lock researchers into an analytical straight jacket but instead provides a menu of options to assess success within the context of these larger questions of democracy.

Still, there is much work to be done to advance the systematic study of feminist policy in practice in postindustrial democracies, a project that should conduct analyses across countries, sectors, and time. As this article has argued, feminist policy studies have only begun to analyze feminist policy in practice in implementation, evaluation, and outcomes. Thus, the detailed information needed to map out postadoption in specific policy cases and instances in the proposed analytical construct may very well not be available. An important next step, therefore, will be to conduct a systematic inventory of published work on feminist policy, including government reports and interest group studies as well as the scholarly literature, to determine whether there is enough available information already assembled to conduct the detailed case-specific analyses for larger comparative study.\(^9\) As work by Feick (1992), Mazur (2002), Poteete and Ostrom (2008), and others have shown, it is possible to use secondary analyses of policy cases as valid and reliable sources of data for larger-scale meta-analyses.

Such an inventory would also allow researchers to determine what type of actual research would need to be undertaken to fill in the gaps of existing work and hence the larger empirical research agenda for feminist policy postadoption. Given the focus on process, actors, and outcomes, quite detailed and deep case analyses of postadoption need to be conducted through fieldwork and archive-based process tracing as well as more quantitative analyses of policy outcomes in numerical indicators.\(^10\) In this empirical data-gathering process,
the analytical construct proposed here could be developed and fine-tuned to better address the empirical realities of the actual cases and available data.

The question of what the drivers or ingredients for successful or failed feminist policy in practice are remains untouched in this article, because of the importance of first building an analytical construct to measure feminist policy in practice from existing work and the complex nature of that construct. At the same time, this is a crucial question for developing empirical theory about feminist policy in practice—that is, which factors explain why certain cases are more concrete, democratic, and successful than others. This brings in more clearly the comparative aspect of the feminist postadoption research agenda as well, whether there are trends in causal factors across countries or types of policy sectors.

Comparative studies of feminist policy formation in postindustrial democracies, mostly focused on the preadoption and adoption phases, have shown the highly case-specific and contingent nature of successful feminist policy formation and the often shifting combination of factors that come together at different times in different settings to produce feminist successes, often in relation to the type of policy being developed (e.g., Htun and Weldon 2012; Mazur 2002; McBride and Mazur 2010; Walby 2009; Weldon 2011). This finding resonates with the non-feminist implementation work that identifies the complex and context specific nature of implementation through the “ambiguity-conflict model” of implementation identified by Matland (1995). A range of factors have been identified by feminist and non-feminist studies to be important in instances of successful policy formation, depending on the context; to name a few, the content of the original policy, state capacity, the political opportunity structure and institutional design, women’s movement structure and resources, presence of the left wing in power, cultural norms about gender, extra national influence, and economic climate (Annesley et al. 2014; Mazur 2002). It remains an open-ended question about whether the same patterns of causation found in the dynamics of feminist policy agenda setting, problem definition, and adoption will be present in the postadoption phases. Thus, it will be up to future researchers to design their studies to assess whether the argument of case-specific complexity also applies to feminist postadoption. To test these hypotheses, it will be important to select a representative sample of cases that allow for a systematic and broad based analysis of the full range of postadoption cases across Western postindustrial democracies and all the different sectors of feminist policy.

In closing, the proposal made by this article hopefully will provide a useful launching pad for emerging comparative research on feminist policy postadoption and for more established non-feminist studies to gender analysis and theory building on implementation. To be sure, it is not the only way to assess whether, how, and why feminist policy in postindustrial democracies actually has mattered. At the same time, given that this proposal has
attempted to build from and contribute to existing scholarship, it has the potential to help advance research and theory building in feminist and non-feminist policy studies alike.

Notes

1. Feminist or gender equality policies are defined to include any government action that contains an explicitly feminist approach formally expressed in an official policy statement (e.g., law, court decision, executive order). A feminist approach consists of the promotion of women’s rights and status, in the context of the intersectional complexities of women as a group, and efforts to reduce gender and sex-based hierarchies, because they are intertwined with other vectors of inequality in the public and private realms.

2. The new international group, the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Project (GEPP), composed of nearly 80 researchers launched a large-scale study in 2016. The construct proposed here has been a point of departure for the group’s research design. For more on the group see http://www.csbppl.com/gepp/.

3. Mazur (2002), for example, identifies the following subsectors of feminist policy: blueprint, political representation, equal employment, reconciliation, family law, reproductive rights, and sexuality and violence.

4. In addition, see the in-progress research project on gender mainstreaming across Europe under the aegis of the European Institute of Gender Equality.

5. Not all policy scholars accept the process-oriented approach to policy development. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999), for example, assert that policy formation should be understood in policy learning within policy communities or “advocacy coalitions.”

6. Policy scholars can become policy actors through a public demand for policy assessment and expertise (Hoard 2015). At the same time, policy researchers can work outside of the policy process and provide independent less politicized assessments of policy success and failure to develop empirical-based theory for practitioner-oriented and scholarly communities, depending on the context for the research product.

7. Anderson (2006) indicates that government policies may range from symbolic reform to more material/concrete/authoritative reforms (15–16) and Mazur (1995) applied this continuum to evaluate French equal employment policy.

8. See Bustelo (2017) in this volume for more on feminist evaluation standards and Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo (2009) and Blofield and Haas (2013) for critiques about gender indexes and mainstream impact assessments of gender equality policy.

9. One of the tasks of the new international group GEPP is to conduct such an inventory.

10. GEPP is also examining the various official gender equality measurements to determine which might be useful for developing indicators of feminist policy success in impacts.

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