

# Investigating the Economic Determinants of the UK Gender Equality Policy Agenda

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*Promoting certain kinds of gender equality—such as promoting and supporting female participation in paid work or male engagement with unpaid care work—is costly. Yet, there has been little examination in gender and policy research of the economic determinants of gendered policy change. In this article we investigate, using graphs and descriptive analysis derived from three data sets, whether the agenda-setting possibilities of feminist policy actors pushing for redistributive gender policy are constrained by economic conditions. Our hypotheses are that it is easier to get costly gender equality policies on the agenda, first, when the economy is growing and, second, when advocates utilise an economic case to frame their arguments. We find that gender equality policy agendas in the UK appear to follow periods of positive economic performance and that economic framing of gender equality policy is essential.*

**Keywords:** gender equality; agenda setting; economic performance

## Introduction

In public policy literature it is widely recognised that achieving policy change is hard, and integrating new issues into established policy agendas is harder still (Annesley et al. 2010). While gender equality policy clearly encompasses a broad range of issues—from abortion rights to equal pay legislation (Mazur 2002; Htun and Weldon 2010)—this article specifically focuses on the determinants of a subset or domain of gender equality policy which seeks to address the traditional division of labour between men and women by encouraging women into employment and men into unpaid caring roles. Gender equality policies designed to get women into work are not without cost to the state, to employers and to individuals. This raises a question of whether gender equality advocates will find it harder to get these issues on to the policy agenda in adverse economic conditions.

There is a literature about the impact of economic conditions on gender equality, for example, the effect of a recession on women's employment and welfare rights (Wintour 2008; Scheele 2009; Women's Budget Group 2010; Annesley and Scheele 2011), but to date there is no attention 'upstream' investigating how economic circumstances shape the capacity of advocates of gender equality to get their issues on to the policy agenda. Rather, studies that have explored public policy-making around gender policy issues (Mazur 2002) have predominantly looked at the agency of feminist policy actors in venues such as parliaments (Childs 2004), women's policy agencies (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995; Outshoorn and

Kantola 2007) and the core executive (Annesley and Gains 2010), and at the capacity of such actors, individually or collaboratively, to shape outcomes in the areas of women's political representation, abortion, prostitution, rape and domestic violence. Conversely, the public policy literature recognises the importance of economic determinants in shaping policy agendas, but no studies have looked at gender equality policy agendas.

This article brings together gender and politics with mainstream public policy scholarship to investigate the under-researched relationship between economic indicators and 'costly' gender equality policies reaching the government's agenda. To do this we draw on the concepts and theories of public policy analysts which have had limited application to the study of gender policy change (Mazur 2002). We argue that it is important to consider the economic constraints on gender equality policy agenda setting, especially in more mainstream economic or welfare policy areas where gender equality policy is costly or has fiscally redistributive consequences (Annesley 2010; Htun and Weldon 2010). This article explores whether there is an association between economic indicators—specifically, economic growth and rates of employment—and policy agendas that have the aim of promoting costly gender equality policies such as equal access to employment and pay, rights to maternity or parental leave or the distribution of paid and unpaid work. We do this through a case study of when gender equality policy reaches the government's policy agenda in the UK.

In a first step, we review the politics and gender scholarship on gender equality policy change and highlight the need for this literature to consider the importance of the economic context for certain gender equality policy domains. We then examine research from mainstream public policy that has explored the link between socioeconomic indicators and agenda setting, drawing attention to the difficulty in determining causal relationships. Next we set out our methods and data sources. In a findings section, we first compare descriptively the relationship between legislative intent to encourage labour market participation of women and/or to encourage the involvement of men in informal caring work, and economic indicators such as GDP growth and unemployment. Second, we examine the argumentation made to explain the purpose of gender equality legislation, to identify the extent to which an economic case is made to justify the policy innovations. In conclusion we argue that there is an important link between economic indicators and gender equality agenda-setting activity and that gender equality advocates need to frame equality arguments around the economic case in order to get fiscally redistributive gender equality change on the agenda.

## **The Determinants of Gender Equality Policy Change**

Achieving policy change is hard, and integrating new issues such as gender equality into established policy agendas is harder still (Annesley et al. 2007 and 2010). Governments can only provide limited attention to new policy development and radical budgetary shifts are on the whole rare (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; True et al. 2007). Committed policy advocates may take years to bring about a coalition for a change in policy direction (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and they often need to wait for a 'window of opportunity' to get new policies on to the agenda (Kingdon 1995).

To date little is known about when and why gender equality policies succeed in getting on to the government agenda. There has been relatively little attention paid to agenda setting in feminist scholarship (but see Terkildsen and Schnell 1997). When agenda setting is an analytical focus, it tends to be because of an interest by politics and gender scholars in the long-term activities of policy advocacy coalitions (for example see Abrar et al. 2000; Annesley 2010; Annesley and Gains 2010).

The politics and gender scholarship provides three main explanations for the determinants of gender equality policy change: the substantive representation of women (SRW); state feminism; and 'velvet triangles'. The substantive representation of women literature investigates the theoretical and empirical links between the increased numerical representation of women in formal politics (the descriptive representation of women) and women-friendly or gender equality policy outcomes. This is an agent-centred approach which places 'critical actors' at the centre of analysis (Childs and Krook 2006). Critical actors are defined as 'those who initiate policy proposals on their own, even when women form a small minority, and embolden others to take steps to promote policies for women, regardless of the proportion of female representatives' (Childs and Krook 2006, 528). While leading scholars in SRW recognise that critical actors can be 'male and female legislators, ministers, party members, bureaucrats and members of civil society groups' (Celis et al. 2008, 104), empirical studies have traditionally focused on the contribution of female critical actors in parliaments, and a wealth of empirical material has developed along these lines (Childs 2004; Childs and Withey 2006). More recently scholars have emphasised the need to focus on where political power and resources lie, rather than on where women are located to understand how and when feminist political actors make a difference to gender policy outcomes (Chappell 2006). For example, Annesley and Gains (2010) argue that in Westminster systems like the UK it is necessary to look at actors such as feminist ministers, senior bureaucrats and policy advisers in the core executive as the key venue for policy change and that it is ministerial advocacy that is critical.

The state feminism literature, developed by the Research Network on Gender and the State (RNGS) (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995; Stetson and Mazur 2010), investigates the impact of women's policy agencies such as the UK Women's Unit/Women and Equality Unit on shaping gender equality policy outcomes. The RNGS studies have investigated the success of such agencies comparatively in a range of gender equality policy domains, including political representation, abortion and prostitution.

A third body of literature emphasises the importance of co-operation between groups of women in a policy process to 'further their aims or achieve goals important to them' (Holli 2008, 169). These have variously been referred to as triangles of empowerment (Lycklama à Nijeholt et al. 1998), velvet triangles (Woodward 2003), strategic partnerships (Halsaa 1991; Mazur 2002) or strategic coalitions (Annesley 2010). These various manifestations of 'women's co-operative constellations' (Holli 2008) tend to involve a combination of actors, including the women's movement, feminist politicians and feminist civil servants as a core (Vargas and Wieringa 1998, 3) but also drawing in gender experts from academia, consultancies (Woodward 2003) or trade unions and think tanks (Annesley 2010) to deliver policy outcomes for women.

Such agent-centred explanations are clearly important. However, they run the risk of underplaying the importance of other structural contextual determinants such as economic conditions and constraints. It is not always possible even for well-resourced actors in powerful political settings to push through gender policy change (Annesley et al. 2010). Other barriers to progress exist, and recent work examining the introduction of work–life balance and flexible labour market policies (Annesley 2010) identifies three possible economic dimensions to gender policy change: the model of capitalism/welfare capitalism; the strength of business interests in the policy-making process; and the performance of the economy (i.e. boom or recession). Similarly, Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires (2008) suggest that state feminism is developing into ‘market feminism’ out of the need for gender equality advocates to work within a neo-liberal frame when making or staking their claims for gender equality policy.

The second significant concern is the need to differentiate between distinct domains of gender equality policy. Many empirical studies in the existing literature of gender equality policy tend to focus on the ‘feminist policy sector’ (Mazur 2002), concentrating on status issues such as the impact of ‘critical actors’ on public policy outcomes in such areas as domestic violence (Waylen 2007; Mackay 2010), abortion (Stetson 2001), prostitution (Outshoorn 2004) and political representation (Lovenduski 2005). This focus on women’s status issues only overlooks the importance of understanding how varied gender equality policy is as well as the different determinants of each type of gender equality policy.

Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon (2010) make an invaluable contribution to the literature by disaggregating gender equality policies according to whether they promote the status of women as a group—‘gender-status’ policies—or whether they address class inequalities—‘class-based’ gender equality policies. They argue that, to explain these different types of gender equality policy change, it is necessary to identify the distinct sets of actors who advocate them, the power those actors have and the specific contextual factors that facilitate or block change (Htun and Weldon 2010, 208–209). Specifically, they argue that ‘state capacity, institutional legacies, vulnerability to international pressure and degree of democracy are powerful contextual influences on sex equality policy’ (Htun and Weldon 2010, 208).

In this article we focus on a particular subset of class-based gender equality policy that is costly or redistributive and we identify an additional contextual determinant which we deem essential for understanding when class-based gender policy might reach governmental agendas: the economic context. We need to understand the role that economic determinants play in enabling or constraining gender policy change. And we need a better understanding of the difficulties faced by resourced critical actors to introduce gender policy change in mainstream domains that have costly economic and fiscal implications and trade-offs.

The subset of costly class-based gender equality policies we select for this study comprises those that seek to challenge the traditional division of labour between men and women. We consider policies that encourage women to remain in or rejoin the labour market, for example policies that make work pay, provide leave for new mothers or contribute to the costs of childcare. We also include policies that promote men’s engagement with unpaid caring roles and a more equal domestic

division of labour, for example paternity and parental leave. These are class based as they are costly and imply a significant degree of redistribution.

The costs of this subset of gender equality policies can fall on governments, employers and men in formal and/or informal work. For governments, costs arise from higher fiscal transfers in the form of social security payments. Also costly for government are the compliance and implementation costs of policy reform and oversight. For employers, particularly small employers, negative costs might arise directly from wage costs, for example from equal pay legislation, from benefit costs such as maternity pay or indirectly from administrative costs of introducing and managing the policy change. For male employees, the cost is perceived to arise from their displacement by female employees, and the often detrimental financial impact of undertaking informal unpaid caring work.

The impact and extent of these costs will be mediated by the model of capitalism/welfare capitalism, the condition of the economy (boom or recession) and by the role of the business lobby in government policy-making (Annesley 2010). It is our argument that in policy areas that carry large redistributive consequences—between the state and the market, within the state as employer and within the private realm between men and women—gender equality advocates will face economic constraints on their agenda-setting activity beyond the institutional and agency-related determinants outlined above. It is clear that gender and politics scholarship has hitherto not focused on these economic dimensions of gender equality policy change.

In turning attention to examining the economic determinants of gender policy change we are revisiting a line of public policy scholarship that has been researched since the 1960s but has been less prominent recently (Blomquist 1999; John 2003, 484). Although we are not seeking to replicate the large-N work of these earlier scholars, we do need to learn from this scholarship and be clear about what we see as the transmission route between economic indicators and the ability of gender equality advocates with institutional capacity—in the UK this means primarily ministers—to get gender quality policies on the agenda. The public policy literature highlights the need not to be deterministic about economics as *the* factor influencing what can and cannot be done.

Debates around causality are well rehearsed in the recent literature on public opinion: does public opinion inform policy-makers' judgements? Or do policy advocates seek to manipulate public opinion? (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009, 47) Our argument is not that socioeconomic variables are the sole or necessary determinant of gender policy change. Rather we argue, like Richard Hofferbert (1966), that policy agendas, for example policies to support gender equality in the workplace, are produced by elites, operating within government institutions, who are affected in this process by the socioeconomic environment and public opinion on the economy (Blomquist 1999, 205). The link between elite perceptions and policy action means that wider economic indicators are part of the elite 'appreciative system' which informs judgements about the possibilities for policy change reaching the governmental agenda (Vickers 1973; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1980; Smith 1982). As John Kingdon suggests, officials note changing public moods and act on this information to promote or downgrade possible policy agendas (Kingdon 1995).

Mark McBeth et al. (2007, 88) describe how policy advocates seek to bolster their arguments 'in the certainty of scientifically deduced numbers and facts' when making the case for policy change and demonstrate narrative tactics identifiable in how they construct 'who wins and who loses'. Gender equality advocates, we argue, will be required to use economic arguments to argue for change when and where it reinforces their 'core beliefs' (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009, 45).

In arguing the need to explore the economic determinants of gender policy change we are not seeking to move away entirely from an analytical focus on the institutional and agency features of gender equality advocacy. We are simply, as Paul Steinberg (2007, 196) describes, moving the focus 'upstream' to investigate the causal importance of economic determinants and the appraisal of these determinants by gender equality advocates on the agenda-setting process.

## Hypotheses and Case Selection

This study is designed to develop the analytical argumentation for the relationship between economic indicators and gender equality policy change and to investigate evidence of economic determinants of gender equality policy change. We do this in two ways: first, through the presentation of descriptive statistics of when gender equality policies reach government agendas in relation to the business cycle; and second, through an analysis of ministerial advocacy introducing gender equality legislation to parliament during the passage of relevant bills. Our first argument is that gender equality policy that seeks to alter the traditional division of labour between men and women by encouraging women into paid work and men into unpaid work is costly. Such policies are potentially hard to get on to the policy agenda because of budgetary and fiscal implications and/or because they might have an impact on a range of established actors and entrenched interests. We investigate the possibilities of getting such class-based gender equality policy on to the policy agenda at different points of the economic business cycle through the presentation of descriptive statistics. We hypothesise that *it is easier to get gender equality policies on to the policy agenda when the economy is performing well.*

Our second argument is that, given the economic implications of class-based gender equality policy, gender equality advocates will be required to employ economic arguments to push for change. As such we expect that costly gender equality policy will need to be framed in a way that highlights its benefits and contribution to economic growth. Gender equality policies will have to be framed within the grain of the market. Thus we hypothesise that *gender equality policy agendas will be supported by an economic case.*

To examine our hypotheses we select a single case study, the UK. The UK has been selected as it is characterised in the literature as a liberal market political economy (Coates 2000; Hall and Soskice 2001) and a liberal welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). Such economies place greater emphasis on the efficient and free functioning of the market over the pursuit of social goals. The welfare state exists to promote economic efficiency and to compensate for the worst effects of market failure rather than to promote more ambitious equality aims through redistribution. The social system of the UK is, moreover, traditionally characterised as a male breadwinner

welfare state (Lewis 1992), defined as one that promotes full male employment and unpaid caring roles for women. Although women's paid employment has increased, the amount of support provided for working women with additional unpaid caring responsibilities has been minimal.

## Data and Methods

### *Identifying Gender Equality Policies on the Government Policy Agenda*

To investigate our two hypotheses on the relationship between gender equality advocacy and economic constraints we first needed to identify clear examples of gender equality policies getting on the agenda—our dependent variable—in the UK. We did this by drawing on data collected by the Policy Agendas Project in the UK, as part of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP).<sup>1</sup> This project brings together scholars from 12 countries to develop systematic indicators of issue attention within their nations' political systems using a common policy content coding framework originally developed for the United States (<http://www.policyagendas.org>), thus allowing for comprehensive and reliable comparison across issues, countries and venues.

The UK Policy Agendas project (<http://www.policyagendas.org.uk>) collects and organises data from various archived sources to trace changes in the national policy agenda and public policy outcomes since 1911. We draw on a coding of the UK King or Queen's 'Speeches from the Throne' at the state opening of each session of parliament since 1945. These speeches, delivered by the titular head of state, are in fact a statement of forthcoming executive legislative intent and thus demonstrate government priorities for the forthcoming parliamentary session. Analysis of the UK speeches indicates a strong relationship between mentions made in the speech and acts of parliament (Bevan et al. 2009). Thus, statements in the speeches from the throne, which refer to policies that promote gender equality, are a clear indication that these policies have reached the political agenda for action. The advantage of using these data is that it is possible not only to benefit from the conceptual and empirical work to identify policy agendas by topic, but it would also allow us to replicate our methods in other participating countries to examine more widely the economic determinants of gender equality policy agenda setting in the future.

We first identified the topic codes relevant to our definition of gender equality policies and then applied these codes to the UK Policy Agendas data set (King/Queen's Speeches) for the period 1945–2008.<sup>2</sup> We examined the raw data set to identify relevant policy agendas since 1945 (and the beginning of an interventionist welfare state in the UK) to identify gender equality policies reaching the government agenda for action. In this process of identifying gender equality legislative intent, we honed in on policy agendas that had the specific intention of promoting gender equality by addressing the unequal division of labour in paid and unpaid work. As our hypotheses relate to the ability of gender equality advocates to get policies on the agenda during varying economic circumstances, we identified only

those proposals that specifically had the intent to draw women into the labour market, support their remaining or returning to the labour market, or facilitate men engaging with informal caring responsibilities.

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

### *Establishing a Relationship to Economic Performance*

To examine the relationship between gender equality policies directed at addressing labour market inequalities and economic performance we looked at data for GDP growth and unemployment. Both are recognised indicators for the health of the UK economy and good time series data are available from the UK's Office for National Statistics. First, we examined annual GDP percentage growth going back to 1948 and created a lagged index showing percentage GDP growth the previous year. We wanted to create a lagged index (Resodihardjo 2009, 31) as measures appearing in the speech from the throne (which usually takes place in late autumn) reflect argumentation within the core executive taking place during the preceding parliamentary year. Government departments will publish White and Green Papers and, since 2002, draft legislation, in potential areas for action which will reflect economic forecasts and indicators. But there is competition for legislative attention from the different parts of government with likely measures jostling for backing within and across the core executive. The final discussions about which measures will go forward for inclusion in the forthcoming speech from the throne will take place in the spring and early summer of the calendar year just as the previous year's economic statistics are being reported. Therefore we suggest that lagging these economic data will capture best the information of relevance to the appreciative system of key advocates and veto players in the core executive.

Next we obtained the unemployment rate (adjusted for changes in the claimant count) going back to 1971 and created a lagged index for the unemployment count (presented in thousands). We produced descriptive analysis, correlations and graphs to investigate the relationship between gender equality policies reaching the governmental agenda and these basic economic indicators.

Finally, to investigate the argumentation made by advocates in respect of the policy agendas identified, we examined the second reading debates on gender equality

legislation that was heralded by the speech from the throne. At the second reading of a public bill, the secretary of state (cabinet minister) responsible for presenting and steering the proposed legislation sets out the case for change, reviewing the background and rationale for change. The debate is summed up by a deputy minister. We examined these speeches to determine if the argumentation was related to an economic case for change or an equality case for change.

## Results

### *Gender Equality Mentions in Speeches from the Throne*

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

The incidence of gender equality agendas was spread over time from a period predating the second wave feminist demands of the early 1970s. The first involved an extension of maternity pay rights following a review of legislation by the National Insurance Advisory Committee (an independent body with a quasi-legalistic oversight remit) which was accepted by the then Conservative administration. The second is the 1969 Equal Pay Bill championed by Labour secretary of state Barbara Castle. The period 1973–74 saw sex discrimination policy agendas included in the speech from the throne two years running: the first from the outgoing Conservative administration which resulted in a Green Paper; the second from the incoming Labour administration which resulted in legislation.

During the neo-liberal years of Thatcher and Major Conservative administrations (1979–97) it is the UK’s membership of the (now) European Union (EU)<sup>3</sup> that is the important driver for policy change. Gender equality was established as an EU priority by Article 119 of the founding Treaty of Rome (1957) (Hoskyns 1996).<sup>4</sup> However, although issues reaching the domestic policy agenda might be the consequence of EU directives or court judgments rather than domestic policy initiatives (Hoskyns 1996; Cichowski 2001) there is also considerable variability in how countries respond to these external stimuli (Dona 2009).

Finally there is a significant bunching of gender equality mentions in Queen’s Speeches during the 2000–08 period, including two separate policy initiatives in 2005, under Blair and Brown’s New Labour governments (1997–2010), described by a feminist minister (Tessa Jowell) as ‘the most feminist government in history’ (Ashley 2000).

### *It is Easier to Get Gender Equality Policies on to the Policy Agenda when the Economy is Performing Well*

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

Table 1: References to Gender Equality in Speeches from the Throne 1945–2008

Date of Speech from the Throne and party	Reference in Policy Agendas Database	Background	Resultant governmental action
4 Nov 1952 Conservative	'improving the maternity benefits of the National Insurance Scheme'	Review of existing scheme referred to National Insurance Advisory Committee by previous Labour minister (Rt Hon Edith Summerskill)	National Insurance Bill 1953
28 Oct 1969 Labour	'provide for equal pay for men and women'	Trade union campaigns, IL convention, Treaty of Rome	Equal Pay Bill 1970
30 Nov 1973 Conservative	'remove unfair discrimination on grounds of sex in employment and training and to widen the range of opportunities open to women'	Previous Anti Discrimination Private Members' Bill introduced by Baroness Sear which was referred to a Lords Select Committee and then re-committed as the Sex Discrimination Bill (HL). At second reading government announced introduction of a consultative document introduced in the Commons and Bill fell at Third Reading	'Women's Opportunities: Government Proposals'
29 Oct 1974 Labour	'ending sex discrimination'	See above—commitment to legislation in Labour manifesto, Labour government White Paper 'Equal Opportunities for Women'	Sex Discrimination Bill 1975
3 Nov 1982 Conservative	'amend the law on equal pay in the light of a recent judgment of the European Court'	ECJ ruling <i>Commission v. UK</i> ECJ 61/81 1982	Amendment to the Equal Pay Act 1970 made via an order under Section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972
6 Nov 1985 Conservative	'amend the law on sex discrimination in employment'	3 ECJ rulings, notably including one on differential retirement age (public sector)	Sex Discrimination Bill (Lords) 1986
22 Nov 1988 Conservative	'remove unnecessary obstacles to employment, particularly in relation to women'	Amendments required to Sex Discrimination Act 1975 to comply with EC Equal Treatment directive (reversing priority given to existing discriminatory legislation), and other deregulation measures	Employment Bill 1989
16 Nov 1994 Conservative	'equalise the state pension age between men and women'	Cost of future pension liabilities and ECJ ruling in <i>Barber</i> case on occupational pensions	Pensions Bill (Lords) 1995

Table 1: *Continued*

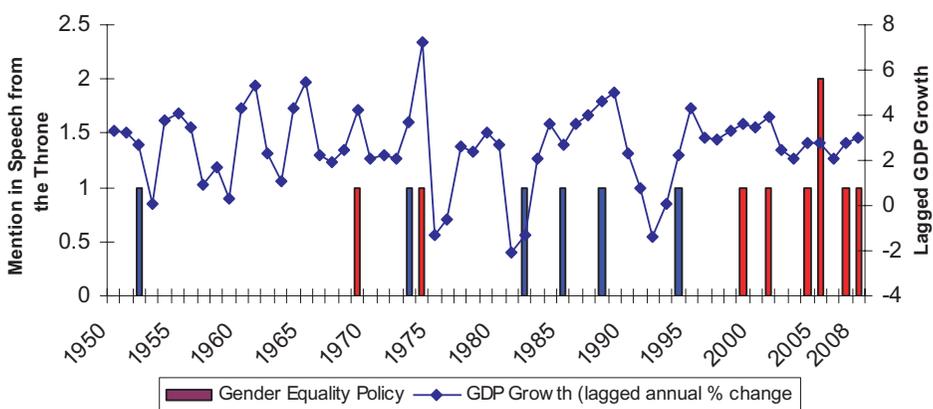
Date of Speech from the Throne and party	Reference in Policy Agendas Database	Background	Resultant governmental action
17 Nov 1999 Labour	'pension reforms, including the state second pension which will give more help to low earners, carers and long-term disabled people with broken work records'	Pension reform to provide second pension for carers and others with broken work records	Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill 1999
20 June 2001 Labour	'allow political parties to make positive moves to increase the representation of women in public life'	Employment Tribunal case ruling Labour party positive discrimination for women candidates at 1997 election unlawful—need for legislation to permit parties to adopt measures to reduce inequality	Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill 2001
23 Nov 2004 Labour	'a single Commission for Equality and Human Rights will be established'	Review of equality legislation required and plans for new Commission for Equality and Human Rights—legislation delayed by disagreement within existing bodies about merger	Equalities Review 2005
17 May 2005 Labour	'offer greater support for working families by extending maternity benefits and improving the provision of childcare'	Measures to extend maternity and adoptions leave, requests for flexible working, help fathers play more role in care and make employers' administrative duties easier	Work and Families Bill 2005
17 May 2005 Labour	'combat discrimination and to establish the Commission for Equality and Human Rights'	Follows 2004 speech and plans for new Equality and Human Rights Commission and review of discrimination legislation, introduces the gender equality duty on public bodies	Equality Bill (Lords) 2005
6 Nov 2007 Labour	'help people achieve a better balance between work and family life'	Review of extension of right to request flexible working for parents of older children	Walsh Review 2008
3 Dec 2008 Labour	'promote equality, fight discrimination and introduce transparency in the workplace to help address the difference in pay between men and women'	Manifesto commitment	Equalities Bill 2009

Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and Hansard Debates

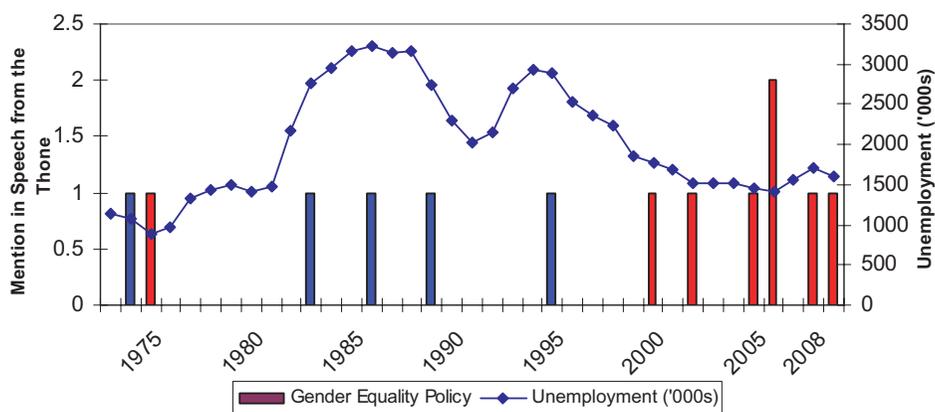
well. Figure 1 shows gender policy mentions in the Queen's Speech (with red indicating a Labour government and blue a Conservative government) together with a lagged GDP percentage growth line. This shows that the 1955 and 1985 gender equality policy agendas followed periods when GDP growth was contracting; both agendas are linked to legal or statutory imperatives for change. However both the 1969 equal pay and 1974 sex discrimination policy agendas came at a time immediately following a growing GDP, as did the 1982, 1988 and 1994 policy agendas responding to European Court of Justice (ECJ) rulings. Conversely the two gaps in gender policy agendas at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1990s coincide with poor and falling GDP growth. Also showing is the consistently high and stable GDP growth occurring during the period of high gender equality policy mentions since 1997. With the small N of policy mentions in our one-country case study, tests of significance are not valid but these descriptive statistics show a higher average mean score for lagged economic growth during the years with gender policy mentions compared to years with no gender policy.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between gender equality policy mentions and a lagged unemployment rate since 1971.<sup>5</sup> Here of note is that the gender policy mentions in speeches from the throne occurring during the 1970s and in 1988 take place following a period of falling unemployment, as do agendas set during the early Blair administration from 1999 to 2005. However three gender policy agendas timed in 1982, 1985 and 1994, coming under the Thatcher and Major administrations, take place at times of rising and high unemployment. Table 1 shows that these are the policies that most directly relate to ECJ judgments, however, and reflect a more reactive governmental stance. Again the data show that average unemployment rates for the years that precede a gender policy mention are lower than for years where no gender policy is included in the Queen's Speech, but no claim is made for significance from these descriptive statistics.

**Figure 1: Gender Equality Policy Agenda and Lagged GDP Growth (annual % change) 1950–2008**



Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and ONS

**Figure 2: Gender Equality Agenda and Unemployment (Lagged Absolute Numbers '000 s) 1972–2008**

Source: UK Policy Agendas Database and ONS

This descriptive analysis indicates some support for our first hypothesis in that the years when gender equality policies get on the government agenda appear to follow years where economic indicators are in general more favourable than years when there are no gender equality policy mentions. This is not the case in each circumstance; in particular there are some years (1982, 1985 and 1994) when GDP growth is relatively low, and unemployment levels are relatively high. Table 1 shows these to be years when Conservative governments announced policy agendas designed to respond to ECJ rulings to amend earlier UK legislation in relation to pay and pensions. We suggest that executive advocacy in these cases was reactive rather than proactive. The findings on GDP percentage growth and unemployment suggest that the relationship between economic indicators and gender equality policy agenda setting would benefit from further comparative attention. They also point to party differences and differences in the rationale for policy change, which are explored in the next section examining the extent and nature of economic argumentation relating to each policy agenda.

### *Gender Equality Agendas will be Supported by an Economic Case*

Our second hypothesis is that gender policy advocates adopt an economic rather than an equality frame for their arguments. To test our second hypothesis, in this section we provide a discussion of how gender equality legislation was framed, specifically about whether references were made to the economic costs and benefits of the gender equality policy under discussion. We focus on the argumentation made during the 11 second reading debates using speeches from ministers and their deputies setting out the key justifications and considerations in relation to the measures proposed.<sup>6</sup> The dates and broad outline of the relevant proposals of these second reading debates are set out in Table 2.

**Table 2: Economic Framing of Gender Equality Legislation**

Year Speech from the Throne	Date of second reading debate and minister	Economic frame Yes/No	Key arguments made re costs and benefits
1952	National Insurance Bill 1953 HC Deb 28 April 1953 col. 1975 Conservative minister Osbert Peake	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Costs to mothers through loss of earnings during maternity leave 'a proper subject for financial provision by means of national insurance'</li> <li>- Refers to actuarial cost rise of 30%</li> </ul>
1969	Equal Pay Bill 1970 HC Deb 9 February 1970 col. 913 Labour secretary of state Barbara Castle	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Previous legislation foundered as 'economic situation not right'</li> <li>- Estimate for equal pay will add 3½% to the national bill for wages and salaries 'something we can assimilate at a time of rising productivity'</li> <li>- Will stimulate efficiency and effect on cost of living will be marginal</li> <li>- Will boost productivity, women's wages needed in families, employers benefit from human capital of women</li> <li>- Both equality and efficiency case</li> </ul>
1974	Sex Discrimination Bill 1975 HC Deb 26 March 1975 col. 511 Labour secretary of state Roy Jenkins	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need for equality in employment, training, education, services, etc.</li> <li>- References to wasted human capital 'to mobilise the skills and abilities of all our citizens'</li> <li>- Social security, pensions and taxation proposals excluded on ground of cost</li> </ul>
1985	Sex Discrimination Bill 1986 HC Deb 22 May 1986 col. 569 Conservative secretary of state Ken Clarke	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need for equality in retirement age, working hours and training</li> <li>- Government aim of improving flexibility of labour market</li> <li>- Achievement of efficiency competitiveness and prosperity</li> <li>- Need for deregulation—removal of restriction on working hours—avoid unnecessary and burdensome restrictions on enterprise</li> <li>- Equalisation of pension age has 'substantial' cost implications—not yet resolved</li> </ul>

Table 2: *Continued*

Year Speech from the Throne	Date of second reading debate and minister	Economic frame Yes/No	Key arguments made re costs and benefits
1988	Employment Bill 1989 HC Deb 11 January 1989, col. 853 Conservative secretary of state Norman Fowler	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduce employment opportunities for women and encourage deregulation against 'backdrop of major reduction in unemployment'</li> <li>- New opening for women in labour market—'their role in the economy will need to increase'</li> <li>- Discrimination is not only unfair to its victims but damaging to the economy'</li> <li>- Waste of human capital of women</li> <li>- 'Obligation' under Equal Treatment directive accepted</li> </ul>
1994	Pensions Bill (Lords) 1995 HC Deb 24 April 1995, col. 525 Conservative secretary of state Peter Lilley	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'How to pay for pensions is the most important single issue facing every government'</li> <li>- Legislation on equal treatment in occupational pensions schemes required to respond to the ECJ <i>Barber</i> case 17 May 1990</li> <li>- Economic rationale for equalising state pension age at 65—cost of equalising at age 60 would be £12 billion a year—need to balance 'security to pensioners while not placing unsustainable burdens on future taxpayers'</li> </ul>
1999	Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill 1999 HC Deb 11 Jan 2000, col. 313 Labour secretary of state Alistair Darling	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fairness and redistribution to carers—costing more increasing expenditure by £5 billion but most cost-effective option</li> </ul>
2001	Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill 2001 HC Deb 24 October 2001, col. 328 Labour minister Stephen Byers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Framed as election rather than employment law</li> <li>- Mostly justice, also wasted talent argument</li> </ul>

Table 2: *Continued*

Year Speech from the Throne	Date of second reading debate and minister	Economic frame Yes/No	Key arguments made re costs and benefits
2005a	Work and Families Bill 2005 HC Deb 5 Dec 2005, col. 643 Labour secretary of state Alan Johnston	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong economy and business framing 'Government backs Britain's families and Britain's businesses, flexible working raises employment levels for the economy, widens the talent pool'</li> <li>- Human capital retention</li> <li>- Family friendly agenda has a crucial economic dimension</li> <li>- Cost to small businesses covered by government reimbursement, 'We have been meticulous in trying to keep the cost of the arrangements to an absolute minimum'</li> <li>- Comparative cost of measure to support retention compared to cost of recruiting a new employee far less</li> <li>- Promotes competitiveness</li> </ul>
2005b	Equality Bill 2005 HC Deb 21 Nov 2005, col. 1236 Labour minister Meg Munn	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Equality framing with business case as well</li> <li>- Encourages human capital.</li> </ul>
2008	Equalities Bill 2008 HC Deb 11 May 2009, col. 553 Labour secretary of state Harriet Harman	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong equality and economic framing 'equality is not just the birthright of every individual; it is necessary for the economy: a competitive economy is one that draws on everyone's talents and abilities'—despite global recession</li> <li>- Human capital</li> </ul>

Source: Hansard Debates

Table 2 shows that—without exception—ministerial statements address economic considerations of the *costs* and *timing* of and/or the perceived economic *benefits* accruing from the gender equality measures that are being proposed. The *costs* of proposals are addressed in seven of the 11 debates (1953, 1970, 1986, 1989, 1995, 2000 and 2005a). The costs addressed are the actuarial costs of fiscal transfers, for example in measures relating to maternity pay or pensions, the costs to business of equal pay or of administering policy requirements and the costs to families of low wages or through the lack of employment opportunities for women. The *timing* of

measures in relation to the general economic environment is mentioned in three speeches, as being introduced at a time of growth (1970 and 1989) and as being introduced despite adverse economic circumstances (2009).

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

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

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

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

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

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

married women ... in paid employment ... make a major contribution to our national economy ... as a nation we cannot afford to waste the skills and intelligence of over half the population (Shirley Summerskill, 1975)

a nation that fails to use fully the skills and talents of more than half of its population will be competing with one hand tied behind its back (Norman Fowler, 1989)

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

Other economic benefit arguments relate to competitiveness (1986, 2005a, 2009), boosting productivity (1970), improving efficiency (1970, 1986), deregulating the labour market (1986, 1989, 2005a) and encouraging a flexible labour market (1986).

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

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

This Bill is about the widening of employment opportunities for women and young people and the removal of unnecessary burdens on employers ... The Department of Employment stands for policies of deregulation (Norman Fowler, 1989).

Significantly, this Bill was proposed to parliament by the neo-liberal Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, the gender equality bills brought forward under Conservative ministers (1953, 1985, 1989, 1994) exhibit very little equality framing. Instead they are predominantly responses to rulings on gender equality by the ECJ (1982, 1985, 1994). Labour governments (1970s and 1997–) were more inclined to balance the economic and equality cases for their proposals.

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

## Conclusion

In this article we have argued for analytical and empirical attention to be paid to the economic dimension to gender equality agenda setting. While there is an impressive literature on the role of actors and the impact of institutions on gender equality policy-making, little is known about how economic circumstances affect the capacity of gender equality advocates to get their potentially costly policy concerns on the agenda.

Our analysis shows that for the case of the UK there does appear to be some link between the likelihood of gender equality proposals getting on to the policy agenda and more favourable economic circumstances. The years immediately preceding gender equality policy mentions in the speeches from the throne have higher average GDP percentage growth and lower average unemployment than years with no gender policy mentions. By highlighting this link we are not however claiming a causal relationship between economic performance and gender policy agenda setting, especially from a single case study with a limited number of policy proposals.

Our examination of governmental argumentation supporting gender equality policy agendas shows that there does appear to be a clear necessity for ministers to address the economic case for the policy proposals. We argue that elite appreciation for the economic considerations of gender equality policies is demonstrated in the second reading debates. The speeches from ministers justify the costs to individuals, employers, business and government as well as the benefits for the micro and macro economy. The key arguments here relate to the contribution of female

human capital to businesses and the national economic performance in terms of competitiveness, efficiency, productivity and growth.

In examining the economic determinants of gender equality policy agendas it is also possible to identify trends and anomalies that say something about the agency and institutional determinants of gender policy change. We can identify both feminist and non-feminist 'advocacy' for the introduction of gender equality policies on to the agenda. Institutionally we can also see the importance of the UK core executive as the most powerful venue for policy change, and when this power is tempered by other institutional venues. Our analysis shows that Labour governments are more likely to bring gender equality on to the policy agenda, indicating the influence of feminist critical actors or advocates within that party. When Labour has been in power, this agency has combined with ministerial institutional capacity in the core executive. Conservative ministers have brought gender equality policy on to the agenda, despite weak economic performance and an absence of advocacy for gender equality, but this has predominantly been reactive agenda setting in response to imperatives from external institutional venues such as the ECJ.

This article set out to do two things: first, to explicate an analytical argument that economic determinants are relevant when considering the determinants of gender equality policy change, especially when considering the costly and redistributive gender equality policies required to bring about labour market equalities. We also sought to illustrate the relationship between economic determinants and gender equality policies of this type getting political attention, using the UK as a case study to permit detailed analysis of the descriptive statistics and argumentation.

What we conclude from this single-country exploration of the economic determinants of gender equality agenda setting is that economic indicators are important and economic framing is essential. Thus, in highlighting the economic determinants of gender equality agendas, we argue for consideration of the compound causation of economic antecedents alongside gender equality advocacy and institutional capacity. We also suggest that a better understanding of these political, institutional and economic relationships would be facilitated by further, quantitative comparative work examining both similar and different types of gender equality policy, across a larger number of countries and across time. Further comparative work of this type would make a strong contribution both to the literatures on gender and policy and to the economics of public policy change.

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### Notes

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2. We used the following codes: 200, 202, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 508, 1208, 1300 and 1302.
3. The UK has been a member of the (now) EU since 1973.
4. 'Each member state shall during the first stage (1958–62) ensure and subsequently maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work'.
5. Reliable time series data for unemployment are not available for the years before 1971.
6. Of the four years when policy mentions in the speech from the throne did not result in primary legislation, oppositions day debates on the policy agenda were tabled by the Labour opposition in both 1973 and 1982 but these debates are excluded from the analysis here as the debates were more wide-ranging and not related to specific proposals.

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