

New Research in
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Dietzfelbinger

**How can the concept of gender
knowledge explain the gendered
nature of the European Recovery
Fund “NextGenerationEU”?**

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Abstract

The Covid-19-pandemic reproduced many long-existing gender inequalities and created new ones: women are over-represented in underpaid sectors such as the health care sector and were faced with the double burden of paid and reproductive work in the household, when kindergartens closed. As an answer to the global pandemic, the European Union (EU) implemented a recovery package, the #NextGenerationEU (NGEU) fund. However, this fund reproduces existing gender inequalities, as most of the money is directed to male-dominated sectors whereas the care-sector, where many women work, is left out. To explain this phenomenon, the concept of gender knowledge by the sociologist Andresen and Dölling will be applied to show that the underlying assumptions of gender and its connection to economic topics can be regarded as the root for these unequal policies. By referring to the analyses of the European Semester by Cavaghan and O'Dwyer (2018), the most crucial economic governance regime, and on the analysis of the European Parliament by Elomäki (2021), it can be shown that the EU institutions focus on the productive factor paradigm, leaving out the reproductive sector. This neoliberal perspective on gender equality can also be seen in the NGEU fund. To embed a more critical gender perspective into the EU, a critical gender definition has to be introduced in the process of the European Semester. Moreover, depending on the political group dominating in the European Parliament, this institution can also be a pivotal actor in integrating a more critical gender perspective.

1. Introduction

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the European Parliament and the European Council agreed in November 2020 on a recovery package, the #NextGenerationEU (NGEU) fund. However, this package is according to Elisabeth Klatzer and Azzurra Rinaldi (2020: 8) “gender-blind”: in their comprehensive Gender Impact Assessment of the preliminary proposal for the NGEU they conclude that this recovery plan reinforces traditional gender roles and norms. Indicators of that are economic stimuli that are directed towards male-dominated sectors, whereas women-dominated sectors, especially the health and care sector, are left out (Young, 2022: 3). This shows that the recovery plan even reinforces long-existing inequalities and structural imbalances that the pandemic revealed in an obvious manner. Examples of those are the overrepresentation of women working in underpaid sectors or the double burden of paid and reproductive work in the household (ibid.: 1).

This contradicts the fact that the European Union (EU) implemented a gender mainstreaming approach in 1995 and a gender budgeting strategy in 2005 (O’Hagan, 2018: 29). This leads to the question of how this phenomenon can be explained. Muireann O’Dwyer (2022: 154f) and Lenita Freidenvall (2021: 750) point out, that the failure of gender mainstreaming approaches arises from the different and inherent definitions of gender and gender (in)equality. Thus, O’Dwyer (2022: 154f) states that the starting point of each policy process should be a definition of these concepts. Here, the concept of gender knowledge by Sünne Andresen and Irene Dölling (2005) is useful to reveal the “implicit and explicit gender assumptions in policies (...) and the disjointedness between the commitment to gender equality at the policy level and actual policy making” (Young and Scherrer, 2010: 10). By applying this concept, the following research question will be answered: How can the concept of gender knowledge explain the gendered nature of the European Recovery fund #NextGenerationEU?

However, the EU cannot be regarded as a unitary actor, as political decisions and policies are shaped by the different organs of the EU and additionally by diverging political interest inside the different institutions. Referring to the concept of gender knowledge, with the aim to “gain a deeper understanding of the normative *and* epistemic barriers to the successful application of gender equality policies” (Cavaghan, 2010: 10) the second question this paper will answer is what barriers are there in the policy processes of the EU that hinder the full implementation of gender-equal policies. Hereby a focus will be on the European Semester, the most important economic governance regime of the EU, steered by the European Commission and commented on by the European Parliament. Therefore, the work done by Anna Elomäki

(2021: 3f) on the gender analysis of the economic governance of the European Parliament is crucial for the analysis of the NGEU. Moreover, the paper by Cavaghan and O'Dwyer (2018) on the European Semester is significant.

By answering these research questions, this paper will add to the panoply of research on the gendered impact of budgets, such as on the Structural Adjustment Programs by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Çağlar, 2009: 15), and on the consequences for gender inequality of the austerity programs after the economic crisis of 2008 in the EU (Elomäki, 2019). Pivotal for answering the research questions is as well the paper by Gülay Çağlar (2010), who analysed the understanding of gender and its relationship to economic issues in the gender budgeting approaches of the World Bank and United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

In the following, firstly the analytical concept of gender knowledge will be outlined. Subsequently, the emergence of gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting will be introduced to explain the critical feminist perspective on mainstream economics. In the next step, a literature review on the EU's gender mainstreaming and budgeting policies will be presented, with a focus on the European Parliament (Elomäki, 2021) and the European Semester (Cavaghan and Elomäki, 2021). In the next step, these findings will be used to scrutinise if the NGEU still reflects this understanding of gender or whether it represents a change in the gender knowledge of the EU. Hereby, the Gender Impact Assessment of the European Commission Proposal for the NGEU, which was conducted by The Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament (Klatzer and Rinaldi, 2020), will be used. In conclusion, the research question will be answered, and limitations will be addressed.

2. Gender knowledge

The sociologists Andresen and Dölling (2005: 175 translated by Cavaghan, 2010, p. 19) define gender knowledge as

“knowledge...about the difference between the sexes, the reasoning of the self-evidence and evidence [of these differences], [and] the prevailing normative ideas about the ‘correct’ gender relations and divisions of labor between women and men”.

The concept was first developed as an “analytical device”, which then was integrated into research on gender topics in sociology and political science, criticising the traditional claim that knowledge is objective, universal, and gender-neutral (Cavaghan, 2010: 19). Very often knowledge creation is shaped by men, based on men's experiences and often on a very traditional perspective on gender roles (Tickner, 2006: 387; Young and Scherrer, 2010: 9).

In critical feminist theory, there is an agreement on the general assumption that “knowledge is power, and that knowledge is produced in the interests of those in power” (Freidenvall, 2021: 744f).

Conceptually, the concept of gender knowledge is based on the constructivist approach by Frank Nullmeier and Friedbert Rüb (1993), who state that politics are constructed by actors with knowledge. They furthermore argue that political actors do not only have scientific expert knowledge but also descriptive and normative knowledge. Gender knowledge falls under normative knowledge and can be explicit (individuals refer to it) and implicit (underlying other forms of knowledge) (Çağlar, 2010: 64f). Additionally, the concept is based on the post-structuralist idea that objects only come into existence through discourse, that is by assigning meaning to them (Foucault, 1973: 74f). This means that in a discourse, the concept of gender budgeting depends upon the meaning which is attached to it (Çağlar, 2010: 67). This attached meaning depends on the underlying knowledge, which is according to Çağlar (ibid.: 56) “deeply rooted in the organization’s background knowledge about the interrelationship between gender and economic issues.” Çağlar (ibid.: 56) additionally assumes that this underlying organisational knowledge shapes gender knowledge. Thus, it is crucial to take a gendered perspective on knowledge creation and hence on policy implementation “to understand how gender equality might be sustained (and undermined)” (Freidenvall, 2021: 761).

Connecting this theoretical framework to the research question of this paper on how the concept of gender knowledge can explain the gendered nature of the NGEU the following assumptions can be made: Çağlar (2010: 56) states that every organisation encompasses underlying knowledge. Therefore, it can be said that the different EU institutions have underlying gender knowledge. Connecting it to the Foucauldian notion of discourse, this gender knowledge is shaped by the meaning the EU bodies attach to it and how they portray gender (equality). Individual political actors, shaping politics, also embed that knowledge. However, the scope of this paper can’t address the gender knowledge of every actor who took part in the discussion on the NGEU. Therefore, this paper will focus on the different perspectives in the European Parliament analysed by Elomäki (2021) and on the role of the European Semester to analyse the gendered impact of the NGEU.

3. Engendering Macroeconomics and International Economics

3.1 Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Budgeting

After having introduced the concept of gender knowledge, subsequently, a short overview of the history and concept of gender mainstreaming and the tool of gender budgeting will be given. It is important to note that gender mainstreaming is an umbrella term and thus there is not one single definition, however, it strongly depends on the meaning the respective organisations attach to it. Therefore, after introducing the history, the official definition of gender mainstreaming by the EU will be presented.

The concept of gender mainstreaming first entered the international and national governance discourse at the 4th World Conference on Women of the United Nations (UN) in 1995 in Beijing (Çağlar et al., 2016: 409). There, 189 governments and international organisations committed themselves to implement the Platform for Action, which formulated strategies to implement a gender mainstreaming approach (United Nations, 1995a; Çağlar, 2010: 58). Amongst others, one of the goals was to “[t]ake all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child and remove all obstacles to gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women” (United Nations, 1995b). The Beijing conference did not only lead to a commitment to gender mainstreaming as an overall agenda, but many governments implemented specific tools, such as gender budgeting. As Angela O’Hagan (2018: 27) states: “the PfA [Platform for Action; note from the author] supported the transfer of gender budgeting out of (...) the margins of gender (...) into mainstream policy direction”.

Gender budgeting is a “tool for gender-equitable macroeconomics policy-making” (Çağlar, 2010: 59) in the broad field of gender mainstreaming. Gender budgeting aims at “integrat[ing] gender analysis into macroeconomic policy, government spending, and revenue proposals with a view of ensuring they promote gender equality” (Elomäki and Ylöstalo, 2021: 516). There is not one gender budgeting approach but differences depend on the underlying definition of gender and economic knowledge (Çağlar, 2010; Hingston, 2021: 89). Gender budgeting is nowadays implemented by many international organisations and programs, such as the World Bank and the UNDP, and is embedded in some constitutions, such as in the Austrian one (Çağlar, 2010: 55).

Gender budgeting was introduced by the Women’s Budget Initiative in Australia to counter that budgets reinforce gender inequalities, thereby challenging mainstream neoclassical economics and refuting that budgets are gender-neutral (Elomäki and Ylöstalo, 2021: 517). One popular case of gender budgeting was the criticism of the Structural Adjustment Programs introduced by the IMF and the World Bank in the 1980s; Feminist economics

highly criticized that these were not gender-neutral, but the cuts on social services led to women intensifying their reproductive work (Çağlar, 2010: 59). An analysis of the economic austerity programs after the financial crisis of 2007/2008 comes to the same conclusion: Cutting the expenditures on social services led to “reduced benefits and pensions, [lack of] employment opportunities (...) and the increase in their unpaid work” (Klatzer et al., 2018: 48; O’Hagan and Klatzer, 2018b: 5).

This can be linked to a pivotal criticism by feminist economists on mainstream economics that budget planning and the national income accounts only focus on the formal productive economy and do not shed light on the reproductive work which is mostly done by women (Çağlar, 2010: 59). Reproductive work is defined as domestic labour and taking care of family and community members (Cavaghan and Elomäki, 2021: 4). By regarding reproductive work as non-economic and therefore not integrating it into the Gross Domestic Product measures, women’s contribution to the economy is left out (O’Hagan and Klatzer, 2018b: 4). According to UN Women “[g]lobally, women do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men” (Diallo et al., 2020: 2). Monetized, this would be worth US\$1.5 trillion. Besides the monetary contribution, feminist economists also argue that excluding the reproductive sector does not picture the whole economic system, as “social reproduction and the maintenance of human beings is ultimate importance for the formal economy” (Çağlar, 2010: 60). Therefore, Diane Elson (1998: 201f) revised the traditional circular flow model and added the household not only in its function as a consumption unit, but also as a production unit. Thus, to analyse the budgeting of a country or organisation from a feminist economic perspective, it is crucial to ask whether the care economy and the reproductive sector are regarded as economic activities and if women are regarded as social or economic actors; how these are conceptualised, depends on the underlying concept of gender knowledge.

3.2 Gender as a social or economic phenomenon

To classify the gender knowledge of an organisation in more detail, Çağlar (2010: 67) states that first the implied “interrelationship between gender and macroeconomic issues” needs to be interpreted. With a focus on gender budgeting, Çağlar (2009: 67f) hereby refers to two interpretations of this relationship: the first one examines the impact of macroeconomic policies on women, thereby acknowledging the situation of women and recognising the care economy as part of the economy. In response to that, social compensatory policies are implemented aiming at reducing the negative effects of the dominant macroeconomic

policies. The second one focuses on gender inequalities and their consequences on macroeconomic policies. Here, structural inequalities are recognised as barriers for women to participate in the market. Therefore, ‘engendering’ means breaking up these barriers with the goal of “liberating women from their reproductive responsibilities and from societal marginalization” (Çağlar, 2010: 68). Whereas the first narrative sheds light on the social component of economic policies, the second one highlights the economic value of gender equality. However, in both scenarios, the economic and social spheres are regarded as detached.

Elomäki (2021: 3f) applied a similar differentiation to analyse the economic governance of the European Parliament. Conceptually, the differentiation stems from the critique of mainstream economics not including the reproductive sector in the economy. In that case, the care sector is seen as a social phenomenon, and women working in that sector are portrayed as social actors. Elomäki (ibid.: 3f) developed four different levels of how economic policies can be gendered:

- (1) strategic silence about gender,
- (2) gender equality as a productive factor,
- (3) recognition of gendered impacts and processes, and
- (4) recognition of the reproductive economy.

The (1) strategic silence is defined by referring to Isabella Bakker (1994), stating that through the claim that policies are gender-neutral, the position of women is strategically left out through “dominant policy discourses” (Elomäki, 2021: 3). The (2) productive factor paradigm refers to policies that “frame gender equality in terms of economic benefit” (ibid.: 4) and therefore provides a narrow understanding of gender equality solely from an economic perspective. Levels (3) and (4) both recognise that existing policies have a gendered impact. However, the fourth paradigm goes a step further by integrating the reproductive economy (ibid.: 4). These four paradigms will be later used to analyse the NGEU and its gendered nature. Before doing so the gender mainstreaming approach of the EU will be presented.

4. Gender Budgeting in the EU

4.1 History of Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Budgeting in the EU

In the aftermath of the Beijing conference 1995, the EU committed itself to gender mainstreaming, defined as “not restricting efforts to promote equality to the implementation of specific measures to help women but mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality” (Commission of the European Communities, 1996: 2). In the treaty of Amsterdam (1997) gender mainstreaming became the official policy approach of the EU and its member states, calling for a “gender perspective to be incorporated throughout all policy areas and at all stages of policymaking” (Chieregato, 2021: 808). Connected to that, a range of tools and instruments have been implemented, such as gender analysis and gender budgeting, however, in this chapter only a fragment of them will be presented; they are described in detail elsewhere (Shreeves, 2019: 1). In 2005, a gender budget definition was given by the Council of Europe (2005: 10): “gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and restructuring revenues and expenditure in order to promote gender equality”. However, the engagement in gender budgeting by the EU has been criticized to be too weak and non-binding (O’Hagan, 2018: 27). The next chapter will therefore focus on a critical assessment of the gender mainstreaming and budgeting efforts by the EU.

4.2 Feminist’s Critique on the Gendered Nature of EU Policies

“This is an EU which ignores women as economic citizens and economic actors.” – this quote by Rosalind Cavaghan and O’Dwyer (2018: 96) summarizes how the critical feminist economist literature evaluates the economic policies of the EU. This chapter aims at giving a compact literature review on the analysis of the integration of gender perspectives in EU policies to carve out the understanding of gender and its relationship to economic issues by referring to the above-mentioned differentiation between gender as a social or economic phenomenon. There is a panoply of literature on gender and EU policies, therefore this paper can only display a fragment of it.

Many authors agree on the economic framing of gender equality in the EU (Elomäki, 2015: 289; Çağlar et al., 2016: 409; Vida, 2021: 27). Feminist economists criticise the EU’s neoliberal viewpoint on the labour market policy goals: integration of women in the labour market would lead to a more efficient market and hence more economic growth (Çağlar et al., 2016: 409). Bianka Vida (2021: 27) agrees with that and highlights that the EU gender

equality policy with its embedded neoliberalism “did not address the structural causes of gender inequality and, therefore, gender equality was always justified ‘for the market’”. This neoclassical economic framework leaves out gendered power relations (Elomäki, 2015: 291). Important for this paper is the work done by Cavaghan and Elomäki (2021: 1) on the European Semester, as it is the most important economic governance regime in the EU steered by the European Commission. The European Semester is relevant because it gives out Country-Specific Recommendations to the EU member states and therefore has a significant impact on the national economic policies. For this paper, the analysis of the European Semester is especially important, as for receiving money from the NGEU EU member states have to provide a plan in line with the European Semester. According to Klatzer and Rinaldi (2020: 43) the European Semester is “of potentially high importance in achieving the EU’s gender equality objectives.” By looking at the agenda-setting documents, the Annual Growth Surveys, the authors analyse how social and economic goals are integrated. They conclude, that the Annual Growth Surveys, focusing on growth and investment, discuss the productive and reproductive economy as two detached entities, leading to a “systematic devaluation of the reproductive economy” (Cavaghan and Elomäki, 2021: 14). Social goals are only portrayed as expenses. Cavaghan and Elomäki (ibid.: 14) conclude, that this tendency to shape policies can also be seen in the EU policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another pivotal analysis is the one done by Elomäki (2021: 2) on the policies of the European Parliament on the European Semester. In the process of the European Semester, the European Parliament does not have a legislative role, but is rather “limited to dialogue with other EU institutions” (ibid.: 3). Via non-legislative resolutions and the Economic Dialogues, the European Parliament gets informed on the Annual Growth Surveys and the policies and can comment them (Hagelstam et al., 2019: 17). The European Parliament, often regarded as the “democratic watchdog” in the EU institutions, takes a crucial position, as it legitimizes and/or reproduces “the gendered policies of the EU’s economic governance” (Elomäki, 2021: 2). Moreover, an analysis of the European Parliament is pivotal, as it is often considered to be an “agenda-setter for gender equality” (ibid.: 2).

Elomäki (ibid.: 2) analysed 10 reports on the European Semester prepared by two committees: the Committee for Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) and the Committee for Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) as well as 16 interviews with Members of Parliament. The ECON Committee dealt with questions on the EU’s economic situation, such as structural reforms and fiscal rules. In the five adopted reports of the ECON, gender

equality was only mentioned three times and therefore in this Committee a gender perspective was nearly left out (ibid.: 7). This can be explained by the opposition to gender equality of the conservative European People's Party (EPP).

The situation in the EMPL was rather different: here gender equality was very visible, but the focus was only on the *productive factor paradigm*, reproducing the neoliberal gender agenda of the European Union. Here, Elomäki (ibid.: 9) agrees with the other scholars on the neoliberal understanding of gender equality, as “half of the references to gender equality were connected to women's employment”. This understanding of gender and its relationship to the economic sphere has the following consequence: with a focus on the *productive factor paradigm*, the gendered nature of the EU economic governance is not questioned which leads to a reproduction of gender inequalities. For instance, according to Elomäki (ibid.: 3), the economic governance of the EU increased the crisis of social reproduction and pushed more women into the labour market.

With this in-depth analysis, Elomäki (ibid.: 2) concludes that the European Parliament's policies on the European Semester are characterized by a “*strategic silence* about gender on the one hand, and understanding of gender equality as a *productive factor* on the other hand” (ibid.: 2). These policies are the result of political conflicts on the one hand between the different parties on the left-right axis and the other hand within the different committees. By adopting these policies, the European Parliament “legitimized the gendered policies of the EU's economic governance and reproduced gendered understandings of the economy that underpinned these policies.” (ibid.: 3) Elomäki (ibid.: 9) concludes that a critical feminist perspective is required to integrate gender equality in a way that does not result in a neoliberal agenda.

4.3 How is Gender portrayed in the #NextGenerationEU fund?

Before looking at the critical feminist evaluation of the Recovery Fund, the NGEU will be introduced. The European Recovery Fund is a recovery instrument with EUR 806.9 billion “to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.” (European Commission, n.d.) It is a fiscal program and part of the *Multiannual Spending Framework* for 2021 to 2027 (Saraceno et al., 2020: 584). Together the Multiannual Spending Framework and the NGEU count for EUR 2.018 billion to build a “greener, more digital and more resilient Europe” (European Commission, n.d.). The centerpiece of the NGEU is the *Recovery and Resilience Facility*, providing loans and grants for investments done by the EU countries “to support public investments and reforms” (Klatzer and Rinaldi,

2020: 41). The NGEU also contributes EUR 83.1 billion to already existing programs, for instance to the INVESTEU (European Union, 2020: 8f). This paper, however, will focus on the main instrument of the NGEU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

In the following, existing literature about the EU Recovery Fund will be presented. The most comprehensive analysis done is the preliminary Gender Impact Assessment by Klatzer and Rinaldi (2020). In their paper, they first display the EU regulatory framework, then present an overview of the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis, and review the proposals for the EU Recovery Plan to eventually give recommendations for improvement (ibid.: 5). This chapter will follow a similar outline, first presenting the social and economic impact of the pandemic on women before turning towards the presentation of Klatzer and Rinaldi's (2020) gender analysis of the NGEU to eventually lay down what gender knowledge prevails and how this can explain the gendered nature of the NGEU.

4.3.1 The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women

Whilst the pandemic also created new imbalances, first and foremost it exacerbated already existing gender inequalities, which became especially visible in the healthcare sector, with 76% of the healthcare workers being women in the EU (ibid.: 17). Being under enormous pressure during the first wave of the pandemic, with overtime and heightened risk of infection, these jobs are on the contrary “some of the most undervalued and underpaid jobs in the EU” (ibid.: 18). Additionally, women also had an increased double-burden because, next to their work, they also had to take care of their children being at home (ibid.: 24). Thus, it can be said, that the unpaid sector and therefore women acted as a buffer in the lockdown. It can be compared to women acting as “shock absorbers” to the Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s (Çağlar, 2010: 59). This can be linked to the fact, that the “[h]ouseholds have proven themselves to be the most resilient and versatile sector of the economy, based on unpaid work.” (Klatzer and Rinaldi, 2020: 19) Reproductive work is mostly done by women, with only 45% of their working time being remunerated (ibid.: 19). The pandemic also had a gendered impact on the job market. Many sectors with underpaid and unstable professions such as hotels and restaurants and with a high percentage of female employees had to close during the lockdown. This is connected to the fact that in general women are “more likely to be in temporary, part-time and precarious employment than men” (ibid.: 24). All these inequalities lead to increasing gender gaps which are also visible in the pension gaps and income gaps. Another impact is the high increase in gender-based violence (ibid.: 26–7).

4.3.2 The Gendered Nature of the #NextGenerationEU fund

Subsequently, a general overview of the NGEU will be given. In a next step the analysis of the *Recovery and Resilience Facility*, the biggest pillar of the NGEU, will be done. In general, it can be said that the NGEU is “gender-blind” as it does not address the gendered challenges caused by the pandemic nor does it integrate policy measures to tackle gender inequality (ibid.: 8; Saraceno et al., 2020: 584). Klatzer and Rinaldi (2020: 38) conclude that the “entire proposal [is] highly gender equality-jeopardising” meaning that it reinforces existing gender inequalities. One crucial example is the focus on male-dominated sectors, whereas the care and health economy with many female workers did not receive as many economic stimuli. Moreover, the focus of the NGEU is on a “digital and green economy”. However, in the transformation gender topics are not taken into account (ibid.: 9). Another point is the “missed opportunity to build a resilient care economy” (ibid.: 36). This can be connected to the criticism that the Recovery Plan in shaping the care sector only focuses on the for-profit sectors and leaves out the non-profit (ibid.: 40). Moreover, the unpaid work has not been addressed at all in the NGEU. According to Klatzer and Rinaldi (ibid.: 40), this “not only has severe implications for women’s social and economic position, but also for the economy as a whole.”

Secondly, the Gender Impact Assessment of the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* will be presented. Klatzer and Rinaldi (ibid.: 42) state that the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* “fails to reflex the socio-economic challenges facing women, legal gender equality obligations, or the Gender Equality commitments by the EU institutions.” As the analysis of the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* and the NGEU come to similar conclusions, the paper will focus on the connection of the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* to the European Semester; to get a *Recovery and Resilience Facility* loan, member states have to provide a recovery and resilience plan with has to be in line with the European Semester. However, the European Semester is “highly gendered and its implications for gender equality are problematic from several perspectives” (ibid.: 43). This has also been highlighted by Cavaghan and Elomäki (2021). Thus, the European Semester can be seen as the cardinal body of the EU to implement gender equality and should therefore be of interest in further research.

4.3.3 Gender Knowledge in the #NextGenerationEU fund

In this chapter, the underlying gender knowledge of the selected EU institutions will be scrutinised. Therefore, the paradigms introduced by Elomäki (2021) and Çağlar (2010) will be used to assess the level of inclusion/exclusion of gender issues. After giving a broad

literature overview it became clear that the key points to focus on are the *productive factor paradigm*, whether the reproductive economy is regarded as part of the economy, and the *strategic silence*, if gender is integrated into the policies (Elomäki, 2021).

Elomäki (ibid.: 4) referring to Klatzer and Rinaldi's (2020) report points out that the European Recovery Fund includes strategic silence on gender, as the economic stimuli are directed at male-dominated sectors (Young, 2022: 3). Referring to Elomäki's (2021: 4) second parameter, the *productive factor paradigm*, it can be seen that the NGEU leaves out the reproductive sector and only focuses on the productive sector even though the Covid-19 pandemic has shown "that households are more than 'consumption units': they are life-sustaining reproduction and production units" (Klatzer and Rinaldi, 2020: 19; 40). This can be linked to Elson's (1998: 201f) claim that the reproductive sector should be seen as an integral part of the economy. Moreover, considering the linkage to the European Semester, it also has to be stated that the proposal "overlook[s] the unpaid reproductive share of economic activity provided mainly by women." (Klatzer and Rinaldi, 2020: 45) Linking it to Çağlar's (2010: 67f) analysis of the two storylines (chapter 3.2.), it can be seen, that the EU institutions cannot be placed in any of these two, because on the one hand they do not acknowledge the care economy as part of the economy (first storyline) and on the other hand do not show any efforts to break up the structural roots of gender inequality. Contrarily, the NGEU focuses on the economic value of gender equality. Concluding, it can be said, that the NGEU does not take gender as an economic phenomenon, and women are not portrayed as economic actors. Moreover, the reproductive sector is not considered to contribute to the economy (Klatzer and Rinaldi, 2020: 40). Therefore, it can be said that the gendered knowledge of the actors involved in shaping the European Semester, especially the Annual Growth Survey, lead to gendered policies, such as the NGEU, and the NGEU is in line with the previous economic policies of the EU. In this paper, the pivotal role of the European Semester for implementing gender equality was highlighted. With its influence on the member states via the *Country-specific Recommendations* it is crucial for implementing gender equality and therefore a change in the process and institutions of the European Semester could have a huge impact on the integration of gender as an overarching topic.

Another reason for the gender-unequal economic governance of the EU is brought forward by many feminist scholars. Elomäki (2021: 3) states that "the absence of a gender perspective has been connected to the absence of women at the negotiation tables." This argument is also supported by Kim Robin van Daalen et al. (2020: 1) showing that the lack of women in decision-making bodies "reinforces inequitable power structures (...) [and] undermines an

effective COVID-19 response”. Additionally, Klatzer and Rinaldi (2020: 28) list the underrepresentation of women in decision-making bodies as one potential reason for the gendered nature of the NGEU. Therefore, an analysis of the participants of the discourse on the EU economic policies would be crucial to understanding how gender knowledge in EU bodies influences policymaking. Moreover, a comprehensive analysis of the gendered nature of each of the EU bodies would be required to understand more in-depth how to make the EU economic governance more gender-equal. These analyses have to be conducted in further research.

Before concluding, limitations should be mentioned here. A shortcoming is, that this paper refers to the preliminary analysis of the NGEU. After there has been critique in the European Parliament about gender blindness in the Recovery Plan, a tracking mechanism for gender questions was implemented in the *Multiannual Spending Framework*. Young (2022: 3) however argues that this is not a new tool and therefore is in line with the analysis being done in this paper. Further research is needed on the upcoming economic instruments of the EU to continue questioning the economic governance of the EU.

5. Conclusion

“Many governments established COVID-19 response measures which disregarded women’s higher levels of income loss, expanded unpaid family care responsibilities, and gendered poverty rates” (van Daalen et al., 2020: 12). This paper focused on the EU’s Covid-19 response, the NGEU, and whether it includes gender-equal economic policies. Moreover, the paper aimed at applying the concept of gender knowledge by Andresen and Dölling (2005) to explain the phenomenon of gendered EU policies even though the EU committed itself to gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting approaches.

By conducting a literature review on the gendered nature of EU policies and by analysing the NGEU in more detail it can be said that the NGEU “fails to address the challenges related to the Covid-19 crisis in the care sector and the specific challenges for women, nor do they address increasing inequalities” (Klatzer and Rinaldi, 2020: 8). This can be explained by looking at the underlying gender knowledge embedded in the process of the European Semester and the European Parliament portraying women as non-economic, but rather social actors and by excluding the reproductive sectors from the formal economy. Moreover, gender equality is only portrayed from an economic and neoliberal perspective; according to the NGEU, the inclusion of women in the job market leads to more economic growth. However,

more “growth”-promising sectors, such as transformation to a “green and digital” economy do not include a gendered focus (ibid.: 9). Regarding the social and economic sphere as detached and the reproductive economy not being included, gender equality is seen as a separate and not as an overarching area of policy (O’Dwyer, 2022: 162). This is one barrier hindering the integration of gender equality into EU process. To change that the EU should return to its gender budgeting definition introduced in 2005 and include a deepened and structural definition of gender. Therefore, the European Semester should be regarded as the key instrument for embedding gender equality in all budgeting decisions and passing it on to the member states. Another barrier pointed out in this paper was the political opposition of the conservative EPP party in the European Parliament. Therefore, the political conflicts in the European Parliament should also be taken into account. The European Parliament can be regarded as crucial in integrating gender equality; however, the “visibility of gender equality concerns [is] dependent on the political group in charge” (Elomäki, 2021: 8). Here, coming back to Elomäkis (ibid.: 9) suggestion, a critical feminist perspective would be crucial to properly integrate a gender perspective.

In conclusion, it can be said that Covid-19 reproduced many long-existing gender inequalities and created new ones. However, this can also be seen as a chance “to rethink economics and align it to the realities of society” (Hingston, 2021: 87). To eventually create gender-equal economics and gender budgeting, women need to be represented in the discursive decision-making bodies, and the underlying definitions of gender and the gender knowledge of the EU should be questioned and re-adapted.

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