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National Policies Supporting Gender Equality in Academic Careers: Are the "Global Leaders" Doing What It Takes?

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ABSTRACT

National policies used to advance gender equality in academic careers in higher education in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, are examined based on publicly available documents from 1990 to 2023. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from public policy research and feminist political theory, we investigate to what extent policies are likely to lead to organizational transformation, in line with the intentions of gender mainstreaming. The analysis maps the policy instruments according to their behavioral assumptions, as well as the type of gender equality strategy they entail. The analysis suggests that policies aiming at organizational transformation typically are associated with weak policy instruments where it is up to the individual institution to decide how to implement them. This makes policy instruments particularly sensitive to contestations over the prioritization of goals and power relations in the organization. The analysis suggests that gender mainstreaming policies lack sufficient constraint and/or accountability to lead consistently to organizational transformation.

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Introduction

The Nordic countries have been labelled "global leaders" in the implementation of gender equality policies in higher education (Lipinsky, 2013, p. 17). However, despite their long tradition of gender equality work and decades of predominance of women in higher education, they still fail to reach gender parity in top academic positions. Sweden, Norway, and Finland represent three Nordic countries with similar shares of women professors (European Commission, 2021). From 1996 to 2020, the share of female professors in Norway increased from 11 to 33% (Database for Statistics on Higher Education [DBH], 2022). Similarly, in Sweden, this figure increased from nine to 31% (Statistics Sweden, 2021), while in Finland, the progression was from 16 to 32% (Vipunen Database, 2022). These figures are above the European average (European Commission, 2021). However, given the background of the women-friendly Nordic welfare societies and the extensive representation of women in higher education, the share of female professors could arguably be higher.

Over thirty years ago, Helga Hernes (1987) indicated the importance of the state in advancing gender equality, characterizing the Nordic welfare states as potential "women friendly societies" (p. 15). The state has long been an active player in the Nordic countries, where national policies, targets, and regulations frame the relative autonomy and decentralized decision-making within

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universities. Since the mid-1990s, higher education policies in the Nordic countries have included provisions aimed at addressing the underrepresentation of women in academic careers and in decision-making bodies in higher education institutions (HEIs). In this way, the state has exercised substantial authority over universities' recruitment and promotion procedures, thereby limiting their autonomy as organizations (cf. Whitley, 2008).

This paper aims to map national gender equality policies in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, with the objective of evaluating whether the national policy framework is designed in a way that may lead to transformative organizational change. We ask *whether these three Nordic countries have introduced national-level policies that are likely to lead to organizational transformation aimed at advancing gender equality in academic careers*. In our analysis, we draw from insights within the fields of public policy research and feminist political theory, making use of Schneider and Ingram's (1990) categorization of policy instruments based on their underlying assumptions regarding the factors that stimulate behavioural change. Additionally, we incorporate Squires' (2000, 2005) typology of strategies found in gender equality policies. Employing the conceptual framework of accountability and constraint, we also make informed assessments regarding the potential for change associated with the various policy instruments that have been introduced over time. Prior studies on gender equality policies in higher education have analysed and compared equality measures at the institutional level (e.g. Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Drange et al., 2023; M. W. Nielsen, 2014; Silander et al., 2022; Timmers et al., 2010), whereas research concerning national policies remains limited (Caprile et al., 2011; Lipinsky, 2013).

Consistent with Bacchi's perspective (Bacchi, 2009), we perceive policies as cultural products linked to specific problem representations, often serving as signals of activity and commitment rather than necessarily solving a real problem (Naff & Kellough, 2003). Our study focuses on the instruments prescribed by a policy. Our findings suggest that policy instruments aiming at organizational transformation are also typically the instruments associated with lower levels of accountability and/or constraint. This makes policy implementation sensitive to organizational power dynamics. While our findings suggest that structural and cultural transformation has explicitly been encouraged in Norway and Sweden and to some extent in Finland, implementation remains contingent on individual organizations' commitment and capacity to make transformative change. We conclude by suggesting possible ways forward in the context of academic institutions as autonomous organizations with meritocratic ideals.

Theoretical Framework

Gender Equality Strategies

Sweden, Norway, and Finland have all adopted gender mainstreaming as an overall gender equality strategy, which means that gender equality should be part of the decision-making processes at all institutional levels (Swedish Agency of Gender Equality, 2019; for Norway; NOU, 2011; for Finland; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2010). Gender mainstreaming aims to transform organizational processes and practices by addressing gendered systems, structures, and cultures (Benschop & Verloo, 2006). However, in practice, gender mainstreaming is challenged by institutional competition with more established organizational goals, as it tends to be sensitive to the power dynamics within the organization (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Skjeie & Teigen, 2003; Walby, 2005). As such, the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming may depend on the specific measures implemented to achieve its goal.

Squires (2000) distinguished between three main strategies implicit in efforts to promote gender equality: inclusion, reversal, and displacement. These strategies can all be found within mainstreaming practices (Squires, 2005).

The strategy of *inclusion* is based on an idea of sameness: everyone should have the same access to rights and opportunities, and any direct form of gender discrimination that leads to unequal treatment of men and women should be removed.

In contrast, the strategy of *reversal* is based on the idea of difference. It recognizes that men and women have different qualities, and institutions should adapt to the specificities of non-hegemonic (female) lives. One aspect of the reversal strategy is about seeking recognition, accommodating, and up-valuing women and their experiences. A more practical implication of the difference between men and women are measures "required to address disadvantages experienced by women as a consequence of those differences" (Squires, 2005, p. 370), including specific actions to overcome their unequal conditions for participation. This refers to policies that try to enhance equality through proactive efforts. Strategies of reversal can be either indirect, including measures that target women as a group (such as mentorship, leadership training, and promotion support) or direct measures of redistribution in the form of preferential treatment.

Whereas the inclusion perspective has been criticized for forcing women to adapt to a male-centric norm in society, the reversal perspective has been criticized for prioritizing women over men, as well as accepting the premise of a binary gendered society. The third strategy, *displacement*, instead problematizes the binary gendered society premise (Squires, 2000, pp. 3–4) and seeks to tackle deeply rooted organizational cultures and practices where inequalities are embedded. This perspective focuses on the redistribution of power and deconstruction of the singular category of "being a woman" (there is no single woman-perspective but many), pointing to the need for intersectional analyses. It recognizes that existing structures and institutions are not gender-neutral, but gender and other social distinctions are intrinsic to how institutions operate in a variety of subtle and often invisible ways. Gender equality policies aligned with this perspective, therefore, seek change through systematic revisions and adjustments to gendered structures, processes, and behaviours.

Following Squires (2000), we distinguish between the strategies according to their core characteristics: an individual focus on formal equality and equal opportunities (inclusion), a group-oriented focus on disadvantages and accommodation (reversal), and an institutional focus on transforming gendered organizational structures and redistributing power (displacement). In practical terms, these three strategies are not always separable but rather interwoven and interdependent (Daly, 2005, p. 437) and they should be regarded as archetypes which "rarely manifest in their pure form in practice" (Squires, 2000, p. 4). Gender mainstreaming can be viewed as including all the three strategies (Squires, 2005). Although mainstreaming seeks to break down the equality/difference debate and accomplish organizational change, in practice, it also needs to be based on inclusion strategies in the form of equal treatment legislation and use reversal measures to ensure gender-balanced compositions of committees (Rees, 2005).

Policy Instruments and Their Behavioral Assumptions

Gender equality strategies are operationalized through concrete policy measures, constructed with implicit or explicit assumptions concerning what kinds of actions will lead to change. Previous research has suggested different classifications of policy measures, such as regulatory measures, financial incentives, and plans (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 2007). In a distinction based on the underlying behavioural assumptions of policy instrument types, Schneider and Ingram (1990) distinguished between five policy instruments, of which we have identified three as present in the higher education context of our investigated countries: authority instruments, incentive instruments, and capacity building instruments.[1]

Authority instruments typically mandate or prohibit actions by legal means and can vary in their degree of enforcement, ranging from relatively unsanctioned (soft) to stronger enforced (hard) regulations. Examples of compulsory authority instruments encompass legal regulations governing hiring processes and anti-discrimination legislation. In recruitment and promotions, a special focus

has been placed on promoting transparency, which is considered critical in supporting gender equality in higher education (Husu, 2001; Van den Brink, 2010). This includes promoting diversity by expanding the pool of applicants and using transparent job postings that limit biases in hiring because employers know that their decisions will be subject to scrutiny.

Capacity building instruments are initiated under the assumption that barriers to change may stem from a lack of information, skills, or other resources. These instruments aim to provide resources, knowledge, and organizational support to different actors to enhance gender equality.

Incentive instruments are applied when the government, instead of using regulatory constraints, creates incentives for specific groups to behave in desired ways. This can take the form of gender equality bonuses or recruitment targets for underrepresented sex with a connection to financial rewards. Incentive tools can also include negative behavioural tools, such as sanctions.

Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of policy instruments, their associated behavioural assumptions, and the gender equality strategies they imply, the following analysis attempts to address the potential for change inherent in the various policy measures in the specific context of higher education in Sweden, Norway, and Finland. However, making the distinction between the various types of policy instruments by their behavioural assumptions falls short of evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. Given that the implementation of equal opportunity policies in general, and gender equality policies in particular, is sensitive to unequal power relations in the organization, their implementation may be aided by some level of external scrutiny. In the next section, we add a traditional distinction that classifies policy instruments based on the *degree of constraint* and *accountability*, which helps us evaluate the extent to which the implementation of policies depends on local commitment to bring about change.

Degree of Constraint and Accountability

The nature of the institutional and policy contexts is likely to influence which policy measures are acceptable and possible to implement. Organizations have their own cultural and value systems that influence the scope of possible interventions (Vedung, 2007). In the university sector, three factors in combination limit the possibilities for state influence.

First, the idea of institutional autonomy is strong in the sector and restricts the extent to which state interventions are seen as legitimate. Second, universities are complex, multilevelled, and "loosely coupled" organizations (Weick, 1976) with informal power structures (Callerstig, 2022), which makes it difficult to foresee how national-level measures take shape and how they translate within the university organization. Within universities, the idea of academic freedom allows for faculties, institutions, and individual researchers to stand firm against university top leadership seeking to implement policy (Maurer, 2010). Third, the strong discourse of meritocracy, referring to a social system in which merit or talent should be the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards, has been pointed out to be in an uneasy alignment with gender equality work (M. W. Nielsen, 2016; Powell, 2016). Providing support or special treatment for some academics may thus be seen to compromise academic quality. The combination of these three factors limits the state's influence in universities' personnel policies and leaves universities with large room to manoeuvre in terms of policy compliance.

Taking these limitations of state influence and the possible resistance to policies as starting points, we investigate *the degree of constraint associated with national policies*. This assessment considers the degree to which these measures are voluntary or mandatory to implement (Vedung, 2007).

The introduction of New Public Management (NPM) has made governmental steering of universities less based on formal regulation towards a focus on *accountability* (Paradeise et al., 2009). Accountability in this context refers to "the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect" (Trow, 1996, p. 3). This can be organized through external monitoring or through the establishment of

organizational responsibility structures. Gender equality policies are typically forced to yield when they appear in competition with other, more established organizational goals (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Skjeie & Teigen, 2003). Hence, accountability is often put forward as a central instrument (Alnebratt & Ronnblom, 2016; Mergaert, 2012; Van den Brink et al., 2010). Transparency increases accountability (Van den Brink et al., 2010), as people tend to self-censor their biases when they expect others to review their decisions (Dobbin et al., 2015). Against this backdrop, we evaluate whether national gender equality policies related to academic careers in Sweden, Norway, and Finland are mandatory or voluntary, and if they are constructed in a way that they hold universities accountable for action.

Data and Methods

This investigation focuses on gender equality policies in three Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway, and Finland. In these countries, higher education institutions are predominantly public. In Sweden, there are currently 17 universities and 14 university colleges, all publicly funded. Norway has 10 public universities, nine specialized university institutions, and seven university colleges that receive most of their funding from the state. In addition, there are six private university colleges. Finland has a two-tier system consisting of 13 universities operating under the Ministry of Education and Culture and 25 universities of applied sciences. In Finland, the majority of universities' funding originates from public funding sources.

To analyse the national gender equality policies targeting teaching and research staff at Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish universities, we conducted an extensive search of various information sources. We conducted the search using both traditional databases such as ERIC and Google Scholar and national databases like GENA, Swepub, Lovdata-pro, and Finlex. We considered documents, regulations, and studies within the timeframe spanning from the 1990s to 2023. Our starting point is the 1990s because this is when policies started to be formulated in all three countries (Brandt et al., 2002; Husu, 2001; SOU, 2011).

The search resulted in a dataset, which encompassed legal documents (11 sources), official reports (9), strategic reports, documents, guidelines, and evaluation reports (39), research reports and databases (8), and documents of the EU and international organizations (10). For a complete list of the sources, see Appendix 1. The search included a review of prior research with descriptions of interventions that could be classified as policy measures aimed at supporting gender equality in academic careers.

Our study is limited to policies at the national level and does not investigate how the governmental policy measures have been implemented within universities. The general national-level regulation on family policies, such as parental leaves and provision of daycare, was excluded from the analysis. Although this regulation is relevant for the topic, it does not explicitly regulate equality.

For the data analysis, we used a content analysis method (Krippendorff, 2018) to categorize the policy measures in alignment with the theoretical framework developed by Schneider and Ingram (1990). First, we used this theory to distinguish between hard authority instruments, soft authority instruments, incentive instruments, and capacity building instruments. This allowed us to draw comparisons between countries in terms of the policy measures they adopted. Second, we placed the various policy measures on a grid, considering their levels of constraint and accountability. A measure was considered to have a high degree of constraint if universities were legally required to implement it and a low degree of constraint if it was voluntary. In cases where the policy clearly defined responsibility for implementation and evaluation, it was considered to have a high degree of accountability. If the policy lacked clarity regarding how or by whom action should be taken or how it should be followed up, the measure was considered to have a low degree of accountability. Third, we sorted the policy measures according to Squires (2000) three strategies for promoting equality:

inclusion, reversal, and displacement. This categorization allowed us to make inferences about the potential of the identified measures to facilitate transformative organizational change.

In the analysis, we concentrated on areas that have been recognized as significant for advancing gender equality in academic careers. These areas encompass aspects like the transparency of recruitment and promotion procedures (e.g. Husu, 2001; M. W. Nielsen, 2016; Van den Brink, 2010).

Findings

Based on the distinctions introduced by Schneider and Ingram (1990), we identified authority instruments, incentive instruments, and capacity building instruments in our data. In line with the analytical framework outlined above, we distinguish between the harder and softer types of authority instruments, as these typically differ in terms of accountability and constraint levels.

In the following, we map these four policy instruments and discuss them in relation to Squires' (2000) typology of gender equality strategies and evaluate the extent to which they have the potential to contribute to lasting organizational transformation.

Hard Authority Instruments

The first group of policy measures, which we have termed *hard authority instruments*, includes mandatory measures. These measures score high both on constraint and accountability. In all three countries, these measures encompass legal regulations concerning anti-discrimination and transparent practices in the hiring and promotion processes within higher education. Such regulations are embedded in general equality and anti-discrimination laws, as well as in legislation tailored explicitly for higher education institutions and public employment. Hard authority instruments are characterized by their well-defined legal constraints, often involving grievance procedures or legal sanctions. Accountability is high with clear structures for responsibility and implementation, as well as procedures for following up and making corrections if the measures are not properly adhered to.

In Sweden, Norway, and Finland, gender-based discrimination is prohibited by law. Both EU directives and national legislation stipulate prohibition against discrimination. General *equality and anti-discrimination legislation* regulates higher education institutions in Sweden (Discrimination Act, 2008), Norway (Equality and Antidiscrimination Act, 2017), and Finland (Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986; Non-Discrimination Act, 2014). Anti-discrimination legislation represents a direct authority instrument, preventing discrimination against women, ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups by imposing associated sanctions. The associated gender equality strategy in this context is inclusion, because these measures attempt to ensure equal treatment, or at least to prohibit discrimination, without challenging the underlying conditions or criteria for success within the organization.

Regarding *recruitment*, Sweden (Higher Education Act, 1992; Higher Education Ordinance, 1993; Law of Public Employment, 1994) and Norway (Universities Act, 2009) regulate qualifications and assessment criteria for professors and senior lecturers at the national level. Public announcements, the availability of applicant lists, and evaluation reports from an external expert committee are required. Finland is slightly different, as the recruitment procedures have undergone a process of deregulation in recent decades and are currently primarily determined at the institutional level (Pietilä, 2015). The specific qualifications required for staff and the recruitment procedures are outlined in the internal regulations of each university (Universities Act, 2009). Regarding document accessibility, universities are equated with the authorities mentioned in the Act on the Openness of Government (1999). In the light of legislation, most documents are accessible unless they contain confidential information, such as details about individuals' private lives. The practice of invitations,

often referred to as "calling" professors, instead of conducting open competitions for recruitment, is legally permissible and in use in all three countries.

Significant differences exist among the investigated countries regarding the regulation of *promotion procedures*. In Norway, promotion procedures are regulated at the national level, whereas in Sweden and Finland universities have more autonomy to determine how promotions are granted.

Since 1993, Norwegian senior lecturers and associate professors have had the opportunity to apply for promotion to full professorship based on individual merit. The bylaws of the Norwegian University Act specify the criteria for appointment.

In Sweden, the promotion of teachers to senior lecturers or full professors is formally conditioned on whether they have obtained sufficient qualifications (Ministry of Education, 1996). However, the application of the rule and the definition of sufficient credentials are up to each institution to determine. Since 2010, the possibility of being promoted to professor has been decided by the faculty (SOU, 2009).

In Finland, regulation on promotion procedures exists mainly at the institutional level. Prior to the 2010s, academics' internal promotion opportunities were limited due to the tradition of basing promotions on job vacancies. In the 2010s, universities have introduced organization-specific tenure track systems with more predictable steps for internal promotion, with the freedom for universities to formulate their own policies (Pietilä, 2015).

Enforcing transparency through legislation constitutes a hard authority instrument as it is connected to grievance procedures. These hard authority instruments align with the gender equality strategy of inclusion, because the regulations primarily aim to level the playing field for female and male applicants and aim to address indirect forms of discrimination, such as biased network recruitment. Hard authority instruments are characterized by a high degree of accountability and constraint through a clear responsibility structure in the form of grievance procedures or legal sanctions (Vedung, 2007). Anti-discrimination measures and requirements for transparent recruitment fulfill these criteria. All three countries score high in terms of anti-discrimination measures, but Sweden and Finland have relatively weaker regulations concerning transparent recruitment and promotion compared to Norway.

Soft Authority Instruments

The second group of policy measures includes the softer forms of authority instruments, such as equality plans and requirements for active measures. These measures can also be found in general equality legislation or legislation regulating higher education institutions, but they are less clearly linked to sanctions.

In Sweden, Norway, and Finland, *equality plans*, describing how the organization works to promote gender equality and combat discrimination, have long been mandated in HEIs. Swedish legislation has required HEIs to produce gender equality plans since 1994, which in 2016 evolved into a requirement to document systematic work on active measures and to have a plan for gender mainstreaming (SOU, 2014). In Norway, HEIs have been obliged to develop action plans for gender equality work, including goals, measures, and results, since 1988 (Brandt et al., 2002, p. 92). In Finland, universities have been required to engage in equality planning since 1995 (Husu, 2001, p. 88). Despite these requirements for plans and documentation, limitations and variation in scope, ambitions, and funding have been reported in all the countries (for Sweden, Equality Ombudsman, 2017; National Agency of Higher Education, 2000; for Norway, KIF, 2007, p. 21; for Finland, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2010, 2017; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020, 2022), indicating low levels of accountability.

Equality legislation has evolved from merely banning discrimination to including requirements for employers to promote equality (Borchorst et al., 2012) in the form of *active measures*. They refer to any kind of broad pre-emptive measures that aim to increase gender equality. Requirements are formulated in a similar way in all three countries (for Sweden, SOU, 2014; Swedish Government,

2017; for Norway, University and Colleges Act, 1995; for Finland, Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986). They include an obligation to work actively, purposefully, and methodically to achieve gender equality in all positions. Active measures include ensuring equal opportunities in career advancement and promoting equality in working conditions, especially concerning pay and the reconciliation of work and family life. Employers are obligated to ensure that both female and male employees are able to combine employment and parenthood. The duty of implementing active measures further requires employers to investigate the risks of discrimination, take action to prevent risks, analyse causes of inequality, and monitor and evaluate the measures taken.

The universities also have a *duty to report* on the status of gender equality. In Sweden, the universities are required to report on their progress towards the set target for the recruitment of female professors, without the imposition of sanctions. Additionally, they are required to document systematic work and report plans on gender mainstreaming (Swedish Agency of Gender Equality, 2019; Swedish Government, 2017; Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2020). In Norway, the duty to report is slightly stronger. It applies to all public employers, including universities and university colleges, as well as private employers with more than 50 employees. These entities must report on the status of gender equality and the measures taken to achieve gender equality through their annual reports or equivalent documents. In Finland, all employers, including universities, are required to regularly assess the state of gender equality in the workplace. Gender equality plans must have a review of the implementation of measures taken (Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986). In addition, the Ministry of Education follows the composition of university staff through gender-based staff indicators. Overall, the duty to report is associated with relatively weak sanctions in case of non-compliance (Hellum & Strand, 2022, p. 759). Moreover, as Ahmed (2007) has pointed out from the vantage point of diversity policies in British academia, there is a risk that documentation is used "performatively" to express commitment to equality, without actual organizational change.

In accordance with EU legislation, *preferential treatment* is permitted to promote gender equality. The Equal Treatment Directive (Council Directive 76/207/EEC) "does not prevent Member States from maintaining or adopting measures providing for specific advantages in order to make it easier for the under-represented sex to pursue a vocational activity or to prevent or compensate for disadvantages in professional careers" (Directive, 2006/54/EC). However, there are clear restrictions to its application. Preferential treatment may only be used when competing candidates are similarly qualified, and it is subject to the principle of proportionality. This means that in each case the benefits of preferential treatment should be weighed against the disadvantages for the person who is discriminated against as a result of the measure (cf. Reisel, 2015).

Before these restrictions were enforced, Sweden briefly utilized a policy of earmarking positions for members of the underrepresented sex, while Norway systematically implemented it during the 1990s. In Sweden, the so-called "Tham professorships" (SOU, 1995) introduced several measures to enhance gender balance among university staff, including special funding allocated for the recruitment of female professors, postdoctoral fellows, and doctoral students. The professorships were designated for the underrepresented sex, especially in areas with very low female representation (Jordansson, 1999). However, the European Court of Justice clarified that for a female applicant to be recruited, she must have equal or nearly equal merits compared to male applicants, leading to the rejection of the way preferential treatment was suggested in the bill (Lerwall, 2001).

In Norway, higher education legislation in the 1990s (University and Colleges Act, 1995) included a paragraph for earmarking positions for the underrepresented sex (§ 30.3). It was perceived as a highly effective measure and a radical tool for increasing the share of female academics (Brandt et al., 2002, p. 96; H. B. Nielsen, 2004, p. 313). However, also in Norway, it was considered discriminatory towards men, according to an EFTA court ruling in 2003 (Husu, 2015; Skjeie et al., 2019), and was discontinued in the Higher Education Act of 2005. In summary, Norway has been the primary country actively using preferential treatment measures, while Sweden employed them briefly and Finland has not utilized them at all.

The softer instruments, while authorized by the government, exhibit less transparency in accountability compared to the more stringent authority instruments. Equality plans, active duties, and duty to report are formally mandated by law to actively promote equality. Equality plans can serve as instruments for identifying institutional barriers and promoting organizational responsibility (Kalev et al., 2006) and raising awareness about gendered organizational processes. Yet, their potential to support the strategy of displacement (cf. Squires, 2000) depends on the way they are implemented at the institutional level (Callerstig, 2022).

The obligation to promote gender equality through active measures can be interpreted as an operationalization of the gender mainstreaming principle and has the potential to support displacement.

However, the legal requirement for active measures to promote gender equality does not always lead to tangible gender equality work at the organizational level. Evaluations suggest that equality plans, while a regulatory requirement, are relatively weak in practice, with significant variations among institutions, and often a lack of robust institutional support and follow-up procedures (Heikkilä & Häyrén Weinestål, 2009; Larsson, 2010; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

The duty to report, while formally a direct authority measure for control and monitoring, has limited accountability due to its infrequent association with sanctions or other legal consequences. The duty to report can help establish institutional knowledge, which is necessary for internal progress. Monitoring could form an important base for advancing the strategy of displacement by raising organizational awareness and knowledge about (lack of) change. Both the scope of the reporting obligations and the requirements for monitoring and reporting on gender equality progress have the potential to establish organizational responsibility and contribute to engagement and institutional learning. However, the outcomes depend on what is being monitored and how reports are used. Preferential treatment is a voluntary measure and therefore falls under the category "soft authority instruments", but when used it scores high on accountability as it is a clear and direct measure.

As strategies for advancing gender equality (Squires, 2000), active measures, equality plans and reporting duties can represent reversal strategies, but they may also support the strategy of displacement, if implemented as intended. Preferential treatment aligns more closely with the strategy of reversal, without necessarily implying more profound organizational transformation (cf. Squires, 2005, p. 367).

Incentive Instruments

In the third category of measures identified, we include measures initiated at the national level with the purpose of encouraging and rewarding efforts to enhance equality in HEIs. We label these *incentive instruments*, in line with Schneider and Ingram's (1990) theoretical framework outlined earlier. Economic incentives, such as *recruitment premiums and equality awards*, fall within this category. While these measures are voluntary in nature, they carry a degree of accountability by making visible "successful" institutions. These kinds of incentive instruments are only found in Norway. Economic incentives were introduced in Norway to increase the rate of female professors in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) from 2010 to 2014 (KIF, 2007). The dedicated program gave the institutes a premium of 300,000 NOK for every woman employed in a permanent, full-time position. In addition, a yearly equality award of 2,000,000 NOK in the period 2007–2013 was granted to institutions that demonstrated the most successful measures to improve gender balance (NOU, 2008, p. 186).

Targets may also be utilized as instruments for advancing gender equality without accompanying economic incentives. In Sweden, targets directed towards the proportion of women among newly recruited professors have been in effect since 1997, with an exception for the period 2009–2011 (SOU, 2009, 2011). HEIs are assigned an overall target based on an estimate of the recruitment base (i.e. number of associate professors in the different faculties). Although evaluations have concluded

that the universities have not reached the set targets, the methodology remains in place (SOU, 2011; Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2020).

Norway employs target measures that are associated with a higher degree of accountability through their association with project funding. In 2005, the Research Council of Norway (RCN) introduced gender equality measures for centres of excellence. Institutions were required to consider female centre directors and to use moderate quotas in the applications for new centres. Institutions were also required to report target figures for female staff and allocate a portion of the grant to address inequality. Gender equality perspectives have been integrated into RCN's research policies (KIF, 2007), stating that institutions submitting five or more applications for centres of excellence must have a minimum of 40% female centre directors among the proposals (RCN, 2019). The Research Council of Finland (previously, the Academy of Finland) has set targets for increasing the number of grant recipients of the underrepresented sex since 1990, with a long-term goal of allocating at least 40% of funding to individuals of the underrepresented sex (Academy of Finland, 1990, 2000, 2019).

Both recruitment premiums and targets represent voluntary measures for HEIs. However, they are typically high on accountability when HEIs implement them. For these measures, the goal is clearly stipulated, the result is highly visible and easy to interpret, and there is follow-up by national agencies. Recruitment premiums and targets are in line with the strategy of reversal as they aim to increase the representation of the underrepresented sex, without necessarily changing any structural or cultural features of the organization as they do not prescribe the specific methods for change. While non-compliance with targets is not subject to sanctions, they focus responsibility clearly on the university, which is more likely to act as external parties scrutinize the university's actions (Dobbin et al., 2015). Recruitment premiums also represent a strategy of reversal as they focus on addressing disadvantages experienced by underrepresented groups of staff.

Capacity Building Instruments

The fourth category of measures are *capacity-building instruments* (cf. Schneider & Ingram, 1990, pp. 517–519). These measures mainly include project funding designed to advance gender equality. The funding is typically channelled through government agencies, such as research councils, or nationally appointed delegations and standing committees promoting equality and diversity.

In Norway and Sweden, we identified instances of national frameworks for funding and promoting equality through both short-term and long-term projects and initiatives. Finland lacks comparable frameworks.

In Norway, the RCN launched the BALANCE program in 2012, with funding from the Ministry of Education and Research (RCN, 2017). The purpose of the program was to provide financial support for institutional gender equality measures aimed at increasing the share of women in professorships and leadership positions in academia. During the first program period, 33 projects received support to facilitate institutional equality initiatives. Since 2004 Norway has also had a standing national committee for gender equality in research, the Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (KIF). The Committee provides support and recommendations on measures to enhance gender balance, promotes diversity activities, and raises awareness of issues related to diversity, inclusion, and harassment at higher education and research institutions (KIF, 2023). The Committee can be considered a substantial capacity-building instrument across institutions in Norway.

In Sweden, the Delegation for Gender Equality supported 37 institutional equality projects between 2009 and 2011 (Heikkilä & Häyrén Weinestål, 2009; SOU, 2011, Appendix 3).

The Finnish governments have not launched national funding programs of a comparable scale. However, during the Rinne/Marin government 2019–2023, two funding calls were directed towards

research projects focusing on gender equality and diversity in academia (for the reports, see Haapakorpi et al., 2023; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

Capacity-building instruments, encompassing funding for gender equality projects and the existence of national-equality committees, involve voluntary participation as funding is competitive. These measures are characterized by low accountability due to large variations in the follow-up mechanisms and responsibility for outcomes. In terms of gender strategies (Squires, 2000), equality projects along with cross-institutional learning facilitated by national standing committees have the potential to support the strategy of displacement by enabling organizational change.

Summarizing the Instruments

Table 1 below summarizes the main findings for all four policy instruments identified in our analyses by illustrating how the different measures are aligned with the dimensions of accountability and constraint, and the equality strategies they represent. We make a distinction between mandatory and voluntary measures, and between measures that are high or low on accountability. The shading in Table 1 indicates the strategy type: light grey indicates inclusion measures, white indicates reversal measures, and dark grey indicates displacement measures with the potential for organizational transformation.

Summarizing the Cross-Country Comparison

Table 2 shows similarities and differences between the countries regarding the measures they employ.

All three countries have introduced legal instruments in the form of comprehensive legislation for gender equality and antidiscrimination. Some differences are found in the policies for transparent recruitment. Sweden and Norway have significant national regulation, whereas Finnish universities have more institutional autonomy to design organization-specific personnel policies. Only in Norway is the procedure for individual promotion by application currently regulated at the national level, providing relatively transparent career trajectories.

Table 1. Constraint and accountability of policy instruments in relation to gender equality strategies.

		CONSTRAINT	
		Mandatory measures	Voluntary measures
ACCOUNTABILITY	High	1 HARD AUTHORITY INSTRUMENTS Antidiscrimination measures Transparency in hiring and promotion	3 INCENTIVE INSTRUMENTS Recruitment premiums and awards Targets 2 SOFT AUTHORITY INSTRUMENTS Preferential treatment
	Low	2 SOFT AUTHORITY INSTRUMENTS Equality Plans Active duties Duty to report	4 CAPACITY BUILDING INSTRUMENTS Funding of GE projects Standing national equality committee

Light grey indicates inclusion measures, white indicates reversal measures, and dark grey indicates displacement measures.

Table 2. Measures and strategies in Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

Measures	Gender strategy	Sweden	Norway	Finland
1. ***Hard authority instruments: Legal requirements***				
Antidiscrimination measures	Inclusion	++	++	++
Transparency in hiring and promotion	Inclusion	+	++	+
2. ***Soft authority instruments: Plans, activities, and preferential treatment***				
Equality plans	Can support displacement	+	+	+
Active measures	Can support displacement	+	+	+
Duty to report	Can support displacement	+	++	+
Preferential treatment	Reversal	+	++	no
3. ***Incentive instruments: Awards and targets***				
Recruitment premiums & equality awards	Reversal	no	+	no
Targets	Reversal	+	++	+
4. ***Capacity building instruments: Project funding***				
Funding of GE projects	Can support displacement	++	+ +	+

no = measure not utilized, + = measure utilized, ++ = measures utilized with more accountability.

Norway has somewhat more soft policy instruments in place than Sweden and Finland. All three countries have legislation promoting active equality work and the implementation of equality plans. However, in Norway, the duty to report is associated with more accountability as universities must report on the status of gender equality and the measures taken to achieve gender equality through their annual reports or equivalent publicly available documents. Historically, Norway, and to some extent Sweden, have applied more radical forms of preferential treatment to enhance gender balance within universities, whereas this is not the case in Finland.

All three countries employ targets related to gender balance, but targets have been associated with financial rewards only in Norway. In Norway, the recruitment of women academics has been directly tied to university funding. In Sweden and Finland, targets primarily serve as guidelines. Finally, fewer resources for capacity-building equality work have been made available in Finland compared to Norway and Sweden.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis shows that while some of the national gender equality policies in Sweden, Norway, and Finland give the impression of having robust regulatory features, they are actually quite sensitive to organizational power dynamics during policy implementation (cf. Ahmed, 2007; Benschop & Verloo, 2006). We conclude that in their current form, these policies are unlikely to lead to organizational transformation. Although Norway and Sweden have explicitly encouraged structural and cultural changes, organizational transformation remains contingent on individual organizations' commitment to change. Upon closer investigation, our mapping and analysis reveal that the Nordic countries' positions as global leaders in gender equality policy (Lipinsky, 2013) may stand on a fragile ground.

Over time, national gender equality strategies have evolved from focusing on women's inclusion to addressing gendered structures and cultures hindering gender balance in universities. However, many of the mechanisms associated with the gender equality measures may not be sufficiently efficient to achieve national strategic goals.

Measures that primarily fall under the strategies of inclusion, such as authority instruments aimed at preventing discrimination and promoting transparency, are prerequisites for equality. However, they are not designed to change the gendered structures that may prevent women from qualifying on par with their male counterparts. Requirements for transparent recruitment and promotion, and the duty to report may appear more constraining than they really are. Within academia, recruitment and promotion take place in a complex context characterized by a high

degree of autonomy within organizations and departments. Decisions are often made at the departmental level and the processes involve many actors. This is probably one reason why inequality in recruitment and promotion processes are still perceived as non-transparent and as going under the radar (Van den Brink, 2010).

Measures representing the equality strategy of reversal in the sense of up-valuing women are mainly voluntary for universities. While policy measures like recruitment premiums and preferential treatment aim to address women's unequal circumstances that may hinder their possibilities for career advancement (cf. Squires, 2005), their effectiveness is often limited by voluntary adoption, internal competition logics, reliance on narrow performance indicators, and adherence to meritocratic ideals (cf. Orupabo & Mangset, 2021). Furthermore, European legislation further restricts the use of preferential treatment, hindering significant changes in gender balance unless consistently applied.

Most national measures that could contribute to lasting organizational change through reversal and displacement strategies are associated with weaker policy instruments than those focused on the strategy of inclusion. Active measures, the duty to report, equality plans, and the allocation of funds for gender equality projects have uncertainties regarding implementation and outcomes and the lack of accountability makes them weak in practice (Skjeie et al., 2019). There is a risk of "window dressing" (Larsson, 2010), where universities make it look like they follow gender equality regulations although substantial activities are lacking (cf. Ahmed, 2007).

The analysis presented in this article offers a theoretical framework for understanding the limits of gender equality policy in the Nordic context, but also possibilities for transformational change. One weakness of the analysis is that we are not able to evaluate whether the measures have contributed to the increasing share of women professors in the three countries investigated. Another challenge is that there have been other changes in policy over the period which may have influenced the academic careers of women in the three countries.

The context for implementation significantly influences which elements within a national policy may have the potential for displacement and lasting organizational transformation. In the academic context, characterized by strong institutional autonomy and a strong belief in meritocracy, particular types of gender equality policy may be perceived as conflicting with the fundamental goals and ideals of an organization.

Hence, we conclude that some of the policy instruments that have the potential for transformative change face challenges of low accountability. This calls for a strategy where policy instruments aimed at displacement are associated with clearer structures of accountability. However, translating displacement strategies into hard authority instruments is an unlikely solution, given the autonomy of universities and the processual nature of these types of measures. Based on our findings, a focus on internal capacity building combined with external monitoring mechanisms seems like a possible way forward to foster a more gender-equal and diverse academic staff.

Note

1. Schneider and Ingram´s other two instruments, *learning instruments* and *symbolic and hortatory tools*, may have been part of policy processes but do not typically appear as part of the national policy framework we investigated in our study.

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