Gender mainstreaming and the bench marking fallacy of women in political decision-making

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1 Introduction

It is argued, both strategically and technically, that a gender mainstreaming process is most easily launched in the framework of a topic in which sex-related inequality is evident. The position of wo/men in political decision-making is clearly such a topic, as the issue at stake is the small presence of women in political decision-making. This goes for the number of women holding political positions, elected or nominated ones, but also it implies the extent to which policy outcomes adequately meet the needs and interests of both sexes. As the issue explicitly refers to the very different positions of wo/men in political decision-making, it is no surprise that the last decade witnessed numerous attempts in many countries to tackle what is often viewed as the under-representation of women in political decision-making. The focus was thereby mainly on the low number of women. While the issue has not constantly been a hot one, it has been on the political agenda of most countries (Lovenduski et al forthcoming).

In this contribution[1] we study the relationship between a policy issue referring to an obvious sex-related inequality and gender mainstreaming. Specifically we investigate the extent to which the position of wo/men in political decision-making has been approached from a gender mainstreaming perspective. Our aim is to investigate to what extent such a policy issue, considered to be easily gender mainstreamed, is actually approached in such a way in a period when gender mainstreaming is on the agenda. Thus, we study the *potential* relationship between a policy issue and gender mainstreaming rather than the achievement of policy goals. We are interested in exploring to what extent policy issues in which gender inequality is visible to all contain windows of opportunities for a gender mainstreaming approach.

We investigate how the issue of wo/men's position in political decision-making has been dealt with in three countries, the Netherlands, Spain, and Greece. This selection is based on the fact that the position of women in political decision-making is not the same in all three countries and has been dealt with in different ways, while as EU members all are confronted with the same policy framework. Moreover, the comparison between two Mediterranean countries with important socio-political similarities but also differences, and a North European country with a longer tradition in gender policy, seemed fertile to us in view of our research target. A fourth case are EU policies, given the leading role the EU plays in this field, since it pays attention to both gender mainstreaming and the position of wo/men in (political) decision-making.

1995 is the starting point for our analysis because it is mainly the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing that put gender mainstreaming on the agenda. The aim consists in an overview of the framing of the issue, to see whether and where a gender mainstreaming approach is applied. The attempt to be exhaustive in the way the issue has been framed explains the broad range of texts (parliamentary debates, bills, government declarations, party programmes, press-articles) from a broad range of actors (government, parliament, parties).

The definition of a gender mainstreaming approach is based on the 1996 communication of the European Commission, stating that it "involves 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 by actively and openly taking into account at the planning stage their possible effects on the respective situation of men and women (gender perspective)." The Communication also states that the

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"promotion of equality must not be confused with the simple objective of balancing the statistics: it is a question of promoting long-lasting changes in parental roles, family structures, institutional practices, the organisation of work and time, their {women's} personal development and independence, but also concerns men and the whole of society (…)" (COM(96)67final[2]). Two elements are of importance in these definitions. First, a gender mainstreaming approach focuses broader than on women. Second, a gender mainstreaming approach challenges traditional definitions of gender. While the 1996 communication of the European Commission mainly reads as solving problems in a larger setting, we assume that this also implies analysing the problem in a larger setting (see infra). We therefore describe a gender mainstreaming approach as a definition of the policy problem or solution *in terms capable of transforming gender biased structures, systems or practices*. This perspective would be contrary to policy approaches that *specifically focus on the social category of women without taking the larger context into account*. Regardless of the particular policy outcomes, we focus on the framing of the problem and of the solution of wo/men's position in political decision-making to investigate the extent to which the issue has been defined in general or in specific terms.

The analysis focuses on the way in which the problem and the solution are framed, relying on problem representation as Bacchi (1999) describes it. According to her, problem definition is a strategic representation constructed on the basis of presuppositions, which are embedded in all policy discourses. The latter are constructed in order to achieve some political goal. Bacchi also draws attention to 'silences in existing political agendas', and in particular to 'silences about power relations and gender relations' (Bacchi 1999: 60). Drawing on Bacchi's approach, we explore the framing of the problem of wo/men's position in political decision-making by asking the following questions: What is represented as a problem in the issue and why is it a problem? To what extent is gender related to it? Is there a shift both in problem representation and in the extent to which gender is related to it? We approach the framing of the solution in a similar way, studying which solutions are suggested, to what extent gender is related to them and whether the last decade has witnessed a shift in these matters. We pay particular attention to shifts in the extent to which either a gender mainstreaming approach has been adopted or openings have been created for it. In this respect, the present contribution is part of a larger investigation on how policy frames relate to and influence the implementation of a gender mainstreaming approach.

We are sensitive to the extent to which the framing of policy issues has an impact on the way in which problems and solutions are conceived. Therefore, we use (the position of) wo/men in political decision-making, a gender balance in political decision-making, gender relations in political decision-making broadly unless otherwise stated.

The contribution we want to make is double. Firstly, this paper provides a state of the art of how the issue of gender in political decision-making has been dealt with throughout the last decade in a number of EU Member States and at the EU level. Secondly, the paper provides for more precise insights on the potential for a gender mainstreaming approach of topics in which sex-related inequality is explicit. The main argument thereby is that such policy issues contain a *benchmarking fallacy*. The easiness with which they can be quantified opens the door for an analysis and solution of problems of gender inequality in terms of numbers, without tackling underlying structural problems.

2 Women in political decision-making as an issue

The Netherlands

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[2] http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equ_opp/gms_en.html 18/05/2004

The Netherlands are often cited as an example of a country with a stable high number of women in political decision-making. Having obtained the right to vote and to stand for elections in 1919, the number of women in parliament remained under 10% until the 1970s. By the middle of the 1980s it had risen to 20%. Since the 1990s women make up slightly more than one third of MPs. During the 1990s this was exceptional among EU Member States, especially when leaving the Scandinavian countries out (Hoecker 1998). Except for the 1987 elections the share of women Senators has generally been slightly lower than that of their colleagues in parliament. At the 2002 national and local elections, overshadowed by the death of the flamboyant politician Pim Fortuyn, there was a slight backlash in the number of women, but on the whole figures remain stable.

Wo/men's position in political decision-making has hardly been an issue since the middle of the 1990s, contrary to the 1970s and 1980s. At the 1972 elections the main actor of the Dutch women's movement (Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij) first campaigned for more women (Oldersma forthcoming). For the next twenty years this would encourage parties, particularly the larger ones, to pay attention to the issue, also pushed by electoral considerations and by their own women's groups (Leyenaar 1998). Since the beginning of the 1990s most parties have measures to promote gender equality, such as quotas or target figures for positions within the parties or for electoral lists. In 1992, the government published a position paper and initiated a project to 'promote women in politics and in public governance'. It was to be followed by another position paper in 1996, but on the whole gender relations in political decision-making was a non-issue and hardly any policy documents have been published since then. Exceptions are the annual progress reports on 'women in politics and public governance' published by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, only two issues related to women's position in political decision-making have been debated in parliament. In 1999 the dossier on 'women in politics and public governance' was actually closed, addressed only in broader plans for equal opportunities' policies.

Spain

Compared to the Netherlands Spain is a very different case. On the one hand, Spain has been one of the EU Member States with a rather low number of women in political decision-making until the end of the 1990s. On the other hand, there has been some debate on the position of women. In 1932 women obtained the right to vote and to stand for elections, but studies on the position of women in political decision-making generally take a start when the Franco regime came to an end (Astelarra 1998). From 1977 until the end of the 1980s women made up about 6% of the MPs in the national parliament. During the 1990s their number rose to 15%, to attain 28% in 2000 and 36% in 2004. Hence, over the last few years Spain joined states with a high number of women in elected political positions such as the Netherlands. However, the number of women remains considerably lower in the Senate, making up 23% since the 2004 general elections.

The position of wo/men in political decision-making became an issue at the end of the 1980s. From then onwards debates, fed by left wing parties, mainly focused on quotas. In 1988 the Socialists (PSOE) launched a debate on quotas and approved a 25% minimum quota for women for party functions and for electoral lists. In reaction to this measure, the Leftist Party (IU) set a quota of 35% and although the number of women elected did not rise to the quotas set, it started its way upwards (Bustelo et al. 2004). In 1996 the Conservatives (PP) came to power, rejecting what they call the 'wonder-bra' quotas. The debate on quotas first entered the legislative arena in 1997 when the Leftist Party questioned the Conservatives about their plans to guarantee a higher participation of women in politics in the Women's Right Committee of the Parliament. The third National Plan for Equal Opportunities (1997-

2000) contained a section on 'power and decision-making' and several subsequent regional equality plans, as well as the fourth national one, contained similar sections.

The 1999 municipal and regional elections led to a quotas debate within all parties. Socialist women published articles and the party underlined its support for quotas, a position shared by the Leftist party. The Conservatives repeated their rejection but increased the number of women candidates. The various parties maintained their positions in subsequent elections, and in the 2000 general elections parties used quotas as a campaign issue. Changing its statutes, the Leftist party raised its quota. Debates were also influenced by the French parity law but the 'constitutionalisation' of the issue of wo/men in political decision-making was tackled with more reluctance than in France (Valiente forthcoming).

In 2000 the Socialists presented a bill for the reform of the national electoral system, which was rejected. During the 2002 elections the Socialists adopted an equality plan with a strong commitment for parity democracy. Both the Socialists and the Leftist party respectively submitted a bill on an egalitarian access to electoral positions, but none of them would pass. A mixed group of parliamentarians also presented a bill meant to guarantee men and women equal access to electoral positions, which was also rejected. Regions such as the Baleares and Castilla-La Mancha approved bills including the zipper principle, which were considered unconstitutional by the conservative government and taken to the Constitutional Court (Bustelo et al. 2004).

Greece

Greek women obtained full political rights only in 1952. Until the end of the 1980s the number of women in political decision-making was very low, but although the share of women started to increase more recently, it is still considerably lower than in most EU Member States (Pantelidou Maloutas 1998). Until the end of the 1980s women made up no more than 5% of the national MPs. At the 1996 elections there were 6% women MPs, to climb to 9% in 2000 and to 13% at the last national elections in March 2004.

Similarly in Spain, the position of wo/men in decision-making became an issue at the end of the 1980s around the question of gender quotas. During the 1989 electoral campaign both women's organisations with strong affiliations with the left and women politicians claimed a 35% quotas. This request was not supported by feminists from the autonomous movement, who insisted on the importance for women of issues to be defended, rather than on their sex. The quota was not adopted, amongst others because its advocates did not manage to legitimise the numerical claim (Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2003). The General Secretariat for Equality also launched a 'vote for women' campaign during the 1990 elections, but it lacked coordination and did not have an impact. In the run-up to the 1994 European elections women joined across party lines to lobby for women candidates, a strategy that was successful (Leyenaar 2004, Pantelidou Maloutas forthcoming). Throughout the 1990s, all Greek parties except for the Communists adopted quotas for their decision-making bodies, generally amounting to the share of women party members. Vasso Papandreou, Minister of the Interior, introduced bills on quotas for municipal and regional elections, stipulating a minimum 1/3 presence of members of each sex on the ballots. They provoked little debate in parliament and were voted in 2001. The surprising ease with which the bills had been voted is generally explained by factors such as the relative lack of importance of local elections or the strongly pro European profile and modernisation discourse of the main parties. Only the Communists abstained, by focusing on unemployment policies as being the main point for fighting women's inequality. Anyway, quotas do not have much impact due to the fact that they are applied to open lists (Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2003).

In the same order a bill had been voted in 2000, imposing a 1/3 minimum of women to official advisory boards of state and local government. Recently, equality of men and women

became constitutionally endorsed. Article 116 paragraph 2 of the Greek constitution was changed in 2000 imposing the responsibility on the State to take measures for eliminating discrimination against women. It implied a legalisation of positive action measures in order to effectively implement the principle of equality (Leyenaar 2004; Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2003).

The European Union
At the first European election in 1979, 16.5% of the MEPs were women, considerably more than in many Member States. Since then, the number of women has risen steadily to reach 30% at the 1999 elections (www.europarl.eu.int/presentation/default_en.htm 12/05/04). This is more than in the Greek national parliament, but both the Dutch and the Spanish national parliament count more women MPs. Nonetheless, in all three cases the share of national women MPs corresponds to their share of MEPs (http://www.db-decision.de/FactSheets/1999/EP-Results.htm 12/05/04).

At EU level the position of wo/men in political decision-making received attention from the 1990s onwards, although there is yet no binding provision (Meier and Paantjens 2004). The third medium-term Community action programme on equal opportunities (1991-1995) was the first of its sort to pay attention to the promotion of women in political decision-making. In this setting the Commission co-financed a large number of activities. Examples are the Expert Network on 'Women in Decision-Making' or the 'European database on women in decision-making', gathering comparative data, supporting women candidates during European elections and organise conferences. Funds were devoted to research on the causes of women's under-representation in politics, guidelines on how to create a gender balance in political decision-making (Leyenaar 1997), the impact of electoral systems on the position of women (Laver et al. 1999), and the conceptualisation of a gender-conscious European citizenship by Eliane Vogel-Polsky. The European Parliament also published a report on the differential impact of electoral systems for both sexes (Garcia Munoz and Carey 1997).

Throughout the 1990s a number of conferences were held under the auspices of the Commission. These were for instance the 1992 European Summit, leading to the Declaration of Athens, the 1996 conference and Charter of Rome, the 1999 Paris conference and Declaration on 'women and men in power'. All documents request a sharing of political power by both sexes. More interesting is the fact that from the middle of the 1990s the respective Ministers of Equal Opportunities signed these documents, which was not the case with the 1992 Declaration of Athens.

At the level of initiatives launched within European institutions, first there was the 1994 European Parliament' Committee on Women's Rights report on 'women in decision-making', requesting an integrated approach to increase the number of women in decision-making. The conclusions were summarised in a resolution by the European Parliament, influencing the 1995 Council resolution on the balanced participation of men and women. It was followed by the 1996 Council Recommendation inviting both the Member States and the EU institutions and bodies to develop an integrated approach to promote it. In total, the European Parliament so far initiated three resolutions on the issue. A second one was voted in March 2000, which was the first to suggest quotas as a transitional measure to bring more women into politics. A third resolution was adopted in 2001, drawing conclusions from the Commission report on the implementation of the 1996 Council recommendation. A similar attempt to establish the state of the art of women's position in political decision-making had been undertaken by the Finnish Presidency in 1999 when presenting indicators to measure and monitor the follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action by Member States. In the summer of 2000 the Commission had also adopted a decision on reaching a 'gender balance' within its committees and expert

groups. Finally, with an eye on the 2004 European elections, the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities presented a report on how to ensure a balanced participation of wo/men candidates.

In sum, over the last decade some, although diverse, attention has been paid to the issue in all cases studied. This broad approach of the topic provides for an interesting range of cases. The following sections analyse in detail how the issue has been framed.

3 What is the problem with women in political decision-making?

Our analysis of the framing of women's position in political decision-making in Spain, Greece, the Netherlands and the EU starts by asking the following questions: What is represented as a problem? Why is it a problem? To what extent is gender related to it? Is there a shift both in problem representation and in the extent to which gender is related to it?

With regard to the 'what?' question, the texts taken into consideration share the fact that the diagnosis of the problem is rather underdeveloped in comparison to the prognosis. The analysis of what is the problem is often limited to the conclusion that there are too few women, with a slightly different emphasis in the various cases. In the Netherlands, government's policy to promote women's participation in politics and public governance is framed predominantly in terms of 'women lagging behind men', while a more substantial diagnosis is hardly ever provided (Lamoen and Jeuken 2004). The same goes for EU documents, also pointing at the persistence of imbalanced gender relations in politics. Sometimes the problem definition shifts to the limited monitoring and assessment of policies meant to raise the number of women in politics, as in the follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action (Meier and Paantjens 2004). In Spain, the general problem is the 'under-representation' of women in high positions in the labour market both in private enterprises and in public administrations, while the most specifically political problem is women's 'under-representation' in political parties' lists and positions, and in national and regional Parliaments and Municipalities (Bustelo et al. 2004).

Greece places the emphasis on women's lack of equal opportunities to participate in political decision-making (Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2004). This stress is due to the fact that part of the Greek reasoning of why women's low number is a problem, is that it is undemocratic, as democracy requires citizens with equal rights and opportunities. As a consequence, women's lack of equal opportunities is a problem for the quality of democracy. However, it seems that the framing of the issue greatly varies depending on the occasion. The problem tends to be presented as a democracy issue when for instance the pro-quota speaker addresses an audience that is perceived as not necessarily friendly to quotas, such as the Greek Parliament, as a way to pass legislation through. In other occasions the problem is mainly presented as an equality issue. Vaso Papandreou, the minister who introduced quotas, emphasizes the democracy argument in a speech made in Parliament[3] and the equality argument at the Conference organised by the Union of Greek Women and the European Women's Lobby on 'women in posts of responsibility' (Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2004). Thus, conceptualising quotas as a democracy issue could be a 'strategic framing' to gain the greatest possible support in favour of quotas, democracy being more attractive than gender equality.

When it comes to justifying why women's small presence in political decision making is a problem, appeals to democracy and equality are the main references for all countries, although in some other cases there seems to be no need for presenting reasons and arguments.

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[3] Parliamentary discussion on the amendment of Law 2910/2001, article 75, on the application of quotas in municipal elections, 28.3.2001. V. Papandreou's speech (Pantelidou et al. 2004).

In the EU texts, the 'under-representation' of women is considered to be a problem because balanced participation is perceived as being a condition for or a founding principle of equality, while at the same time it reflects the under-utilisation of human resources (Meier and Paantjens 2004). A balanced participation of both sexes is also defined as a necessary step towards democracy.

In the Netherlands there is almost no conceptualisation of why it is a problem. The Dutch government hardly feels the need to argue why involving more women in political decision-making is necessary; it is simply seen as something that needs to be done. In Spain there is a divide between the conservative party (PP) and the socialist and leftist parties (PSOE and IU). The liberal discourse of the conservative party is that women's under-representation is not a problem, while the problem is that women have not been competing with men on equal bases. Once capable individuals are left free to compete for power, those who are 'worth it' will find the way to power positions and change will come 'naturally'. According to the Spanish left-wing parties, the 'under-representation' of women is problematic both because it reveals the existence of a democratic deficit, and because it is a sign of inequality, discrimination and exclusion from citizenship. No further elaboration is provided, though.

In addition to the main problem of women's 'under-representation', other issues are represented as problematic in relation to wo/men's position in political decision-making in the Netherlands. These are the adoption of a replacement arrangement for politicians on pregnancy and delivery leave and the legitimacy of the conservative Christian party (SGP) excluding women from regular membership. The Dutch government tends to frame the first problem in terms of 'women lagging behind men'. Rather than pointing to the indirectly discriminatory effect of not having arranged for a pregnancy and delivery leave, the government pictures it as a 'supportive measure' for women, enabling them to make better use of their passive suffrage, and possibly stimulating women's participation. The reason for putting into question the exclusionary clause of the SGP appears to be the need to react to the CEDAW-Commission's criticism for allowing it to exclude women from regular membership, rather than an interest in ensuring gender equality. The Dutch government, as a matter of fact, has not taken action against the SGP's discriminatory provision, but has rather appealed to the 'sometimes competing nature' of different fundamental rights, such as the freedom of association, the freedom of religion, and the right to equality. By allowing the status quo to continue, the government is implicitly prioritising the former two rights over the latter.

The explanation of the causes of the problem of women's political 'under-representation' is dealt with in divergent ways. Half of the documents do not provide an explanation. The others mention a panoply of causes, generally without elaborating them in detail. A first set of causes mentioned in EU and Dutch documents are of a structural nature, referring to electoral systems, party structures and selection mechanisms. A second set of causes mentioned cover more broadly attitudes, social behaviour or 'mentality', referring to the perception of women candidates by parties, voters and society at large. A third set refers to gender-related role and task divisions, mentioning the traditional division of roles and the reconciliation of work and family. A Greek intervention during the quota debate states that women's roles are an obstacle for the political participation of women, while Spanish documents mention the same explanation. In broad terms some Spanish texts point at patriarchal values and structure of society, thereby indicating the normative basis of the gendered division of roles and tasks, without however going into detail on this point. A number of EU as well as Greek documents also mention insufficient state support or policies as a cause for mainly the persistence of women's under-representation in politics. Finally,

several documents deal with causal relationships in more generic terms, stating that the conditions for participation are lacking.

In most cases a responsible is designated, although not necessarily explicitly. Governments, parties, public authorities in general or civil society are blamed for the problem. Often, be it implicitly, men are pointed at, but in too general terms. Less frequently women are supposed to cause their low number in political decision-making, being invited to act. Abstract entities such as society or social structures are also designated as being to blame (Bustelo et al. 2004; Meier and Paantjens 2004).

In the problem diagnosis gender is addressed similarly in all cases. Women tend to be seen as the main problem holders, lacking opportunities to equally participate in politics, while men (at least implicitly) tend to be seen as the norm group to which women must aspire to. The problem, as it is represented, is that women do not have access to *male* positions. The strength of this male standard is shown in the fact that men are generally left out of the picture. Furthermore, change is left in women's hands (Bustelo et al. 2004). This is reflected in a Spanish parliamentary debate, in which it is argued that women are needed in politics because this would 'feminise' politics, thus producing a qualitative change. It is not about changing patriarchal values, but to mix them with 'women's values'. The conclusion is that men need not change, but women should make politics more 'human'. This change is not regarded as easy, since, as emerges from the Greek texts, women must face both social (lack of welfare provisions) and psychological (personal insecurities) obstacles to participate in politics (Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2004). Interestingly, none of the texts analysed mentions the possible 'psychological' obstacles of men that prevent them from sharing power with women, while male domination is not put into question (Meier and Paantjens 2004).

Furthermore, several texts, at least implicitly, contain essentialist definitions of gender. For instance, in the EU, gender is addressed as a social category at an explicit level, but as an identity at an implicit one. This is reflected in the argument that a balanced participation of women in decision-making will lead to the consideration of the interests and needs of the entire population. The attribution of such an essentialist representation of interests on the part of both sexes reflects the conception of gender as an identity (Meier and Paantjens 2004). Women are thought to be essentially different and hold different values than men, which is also the case in Greece and Spain. The texts, however, do not provide explanations for this difference.

In the Netherlands, two new concepts have recently emerged in the governmental discourse on women's participation in political decision-making, although they did not have a significant impact on the general frame of 'women lagging behind men' (Lamoen and Jeuken 2004). The first one is the notion of 'diversity' that increasingly overshadows the initial focus on women's participation. At first sight this concept seems to open the way for linking gender to other in/ex-clusionary mechanisms. In practice, however, the notion of diversity appears to be translated primarily in terms of promoting the participation of (women from) ethnic minorities. The second concept is the notion of 'cultural change', which often refers to the diversity among representatives. Though officially aimed at preventing the high turnover of women, the pilot studies as described in policy documents tend to be targeted largely at promoting a varied composition of representative bodies. Moreover, in the emancipation policy framing of the issue, and specifically in the Mid Term Policy Plan on Emancipation (2000), shifts in political power are mentioned in the diagnosis as relevant factors in the realm of decision making, but not so much in the prognosis. Current Dutch policy initiatives are still framed in terms of integrating ethnic minorities/women in existing political structures and practices, rather than more radically challenging the status quo.

In Greece there have been important changes in gender policy and there are increasingly more debates on mainstreaming, a significant factor being the willingness to comply with EU

legislation. This attitude can lead to a stronger Europeanisation of Greek gender policy showing an increasing positive consideration of gender equality on the part of policy makers. However, the design and implementation of gender policy in Greece has been guided by the framing of equality in terms of women's 'difference'. In this context gender is conceptualised as a clear dichotomy, with specific roles and duties belonging to each side, without putting into question prevailing conceptions of gender. This has favoured the legitimisation of a traditional perception of women and their roles, by limiting gender policy mainly to provisions that help women to fulfil their ascribed roles. Thus, there is no serious challenging of the existing division of gender roles. This might explain why traditional frames persist even within discourses that intend to be progressive towards gender equality (Pantelidou Maloutas et al. 2004). Intrinsically, the Greek case, much the same as the Dutch one, contains shifts in the framing of the issue of women's position in political decision-making, which could be a window of opportunity for a gender mainstreaming approach. The Greek reference to concepts such as democracy or equality could be an opening for gender mainstreaming, as does the introduction of the concept of diversity in Dutch policies. Both concepts allow for a broader approach of the problem of wo/men's position in political decision-making instead of narrowing it down to special policies targeted at women. However, in neither case the introduction of these concepts leads to a gender mainstreaming approach.

In Spain there is a shift of perspective from the national to the Basque regional equality plan as the latter focuses on the lack of women's empowerment and the presence of male domination in power positions as obstacles to women's participation (Bustelo et al. 2004). Although it does not explicitly mention the patriarchal structures in which power relations are situated, the Basque plan claims that gender relations are power relations, thus paying greater attention to the structural causes of inequality. This opens the way to a more global approach to the issue, in the direction of a gender mainstreaming perspective, to which the plan explicitly refers. As stated in the plan, the problem of women's 'under-representation' in all fields is caused by the lack of substantive equality, by the obstacles that public administrations pose to women's participation, and by women's lack of empowerment that hinders an assertive claiming of their needs.

This is already a broader diagnosis of the problem than the one emerging from the national equality plans, but there is one more interesting evolution, though still at an embryonic stage: Related to the concept of empowerment are the concepts of 'power over' and 'power to'. According to the indications of the plan, women's empowerment should take its point of departure from the concept of 'power to'. Women are supposed to exercise 'power to', rather than 'power over', but as they are acting within the same structures as men, dominating structures would need to turn less hierarchical in order for women - and men - to exercise 'power to'. There is no further elaboration, however, of the implications of the notion of 'power to', nor of the kind of change that would be necessary to enable both women and men to exercise this type of power. This text is one of the few, where the construction of gender is put into question instead of parting from fixed – or even essentialist – definitions of men and women. A similar analysis can be found in the Spanish Leftist Party's programme for the 2004 general elections (Bustelo et al. 2004).

The EU presents most shifts in the framing of the issue towards a more holistic approach, although not in its binding documents. It is probably not coincidental that most of the EU documents that show an evolution towards a gender mainstreaming approach are produced in the two years after Beijing, when the dictates of the platform are still fresh. Council Recommendation 96/694 of 2 December 1996 on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process, for example, asked Member States to develop an *integrated approach* to promote a balanced participation of women and men in decision-making. A similar standpoint is taken in the Report from the Commission to the

Council, the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee on the implementation of Council recommendation 96/694, where it is concluded that '(T)he problem of under-representation of women in decision-making posts is *structural* and *multifaceted*. It has to be tackled at the same time in *all its aspects* both in terms of political and social mechanisms and in terms of (…) changes of attitudes and behaviours'.

The Charter of Rome on 'women for the renewal of politics and society', signed by the women Ministers of EU Member States in May 1996, is innovative in its diagnosis, since it is one of the few documents where the reverse side of women's low presence in decision-making is explicitly mentioned. Male domination of political life is represented as the problem, together with women's 'under-representation' in these areas.

However, the EU text that shows a more significant shift towards a gender mainstreaming perspective is the 1997 brochure, on how to create a gender balance in political decision-making. It explicitly links the problem to the gender division of labour and of care. Similar analyses, though in a more implicit state can be found in the Spanish Socialist Party's electoral programme for the 2004 elections pointing at patriarchal structures and traditions (Bustelo et al. 2004). Interestingly, interests and needs of women are not related to an intrinsic female identity, but rather are attributed to women's experiences, which are linked to the gender division of tasks and roles. Moreover, many behavioural or normative dimensions of gender are recognised and defined as dependent on institutional factors. The text proves that a lot of information is available on the issue of wo/men's position in political decision-making. However, although the European Commission financed the brochure, little of this information trickles down in subsequent policy initiatives emanating from the EU institutions. An exception to this are the reports written by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, such as the one preparing the 2004 European elections, or resolutions of the European Parliament such as the one of March 2000.

4 How are solutions for women in political decision-making framed?

On the whole, the 'what to do' question receives more attention than the problem analysis itself. Policy documents focus rather on prognosis than on diagnosis. The overall goal is generally consistent with the definition of the problem: increasing the number of women in decision-making. At an abstract level it is framed as equality but most texts translate this as a need for more women in political decision-making or for a balanced participation. Many documents interchangeably use terms such as parity and equality, standing for anything from "more women via balanced participation" to "equal participation". In several cases the goal to achieve must be read between the lines, for instance in the European Parliament's resolution of March 2000 on women in decision-making. In certain cases the goal is framed in broader terms, such as the Dutch efforts to promote diversity. But some goals also adopt a more technical and in that respect limited focus, a nice illustration of which is the Finnish European Union presidency report on how the Member States can follow up the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The goal is reduced to the collection of data on the position of women in the Member States. It does not define a goal to be attained in this field or how to measure progress. The report further contains no explanation on how these indicators will help Member States from *measuring* the position of women in political decision-making to enhance it. Data collection becomes a goal in itself.

When it comes to solving the problem of women's low numbers, a thorough analysis of what is concretely to be done is hardly found. Many documents contain vague statements such as 'considering how policies could be initiated', 'new initiatives developed', or confirm that the 'necessary steps will be taken', as in the Charter of Rome (Meier and Paantjens

2004). Others simply repeat the goal itself, going for the 'promotion of a more balanced participation'. Such statements are hollow promises, without any clear commitment in terms of what, when, how, by whom, and by which means (Lamoen and Yeuken 2004). Examples of these, can be found in all cases studied. In Spain, the prognosis in the official documents (equality plans launched by the national and regional executives) contains far-reaching goals but few strategies to achieve them. The actions proposed include the analysis of the barriers to the participation of women in decision-making, the promotion of women's training to achieve decision-making positions, the spreading of good practices and experiences, the support to NGOs that promote women staff, the improvement of statistical data in order to determine the progress of women's incorporation in decision-making. Little is said of how these goals will be achieved.

Other documents do the opposite and present a host of concrete measures to achieve a balance in decision-making, typical illustrations of which are equal opportunities' policy plans or resolutions of the European Parliament. Lists of measures include, in various combinations and changing order, the following actions: long-term political commitment, study, monitor and analyse the position of women in decision-making, develop sensitising and mobilising measures, provide education and training, adapt recruitment and selection procedures within political parties, change electoral systems, adopt target figures or quotas, exchange experiences, develop legislation meant to achieve equal rights of men and women, facilitate the combination of politics and family, or, more generally, work and family. Especially Greek proposals also consider social welfare provisions, although the focus is on quotas as a temporary remedy for the low numbers of women (Pantelidou Maloutas et al 2004).

In many cases these enumerations of measures resemble a shopping list rather than a comprehensive policy strategy, since they lack an explanation of how the measures will solve the problem. The Commission report on the implementation of Council recommendation 96/694 actually recommends the simultaneous adoption of a comprehensive integrated strategy and a mix of concrete measures. The report does not explain how this mix of policy measures relates to a comprehensive integrated strategy. Neither does it address the issue of how these measures will concretely solve the problem of women's position in political decision-making (Meier and Paantjens 2004). Nonetheless, although diagnosis is often missing, many cases suggest a comprehensive and integrated approach to the problem. However, without concrete measures of how to put it into practice, a broad approach to the solution and gender mainstreaming are but a slogan. The only tangible solution offered in Greece and Spain[4], refers to quotas in political parties and electoral systems. If other solutions are mentioned, like increasing welfare provisions for women or intervening in the education system in Greece, or promoting women's training or encouraging them to participate in Spain, these are vague.

Most concrete comprehensive approaches can actually be found in documents from civil society actors or scientists. A commonly heard argument is that to achieve parity the participation of women must be promoted, but this should not be dissociated from other problems and their solution. The European Women's Lobby (EWL), for instance, refers to the elimination of discrimination of girls in education, the elimination of the pay gap and the increased sharing of family responsibilities. To achieve a parity democracy, a global strategy is required. Not only quotas or target figures are needed, but also constitutional and legal or attitudinal changes (Meier and Paantjens 2004). Even more elaborated is the EU brochure on how to reach a gender balance in politics. It contains not only an important list of measures to take but explains for all of them why they are helpful and how they should be put into

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[4] In the latter case this is done by the Socialist party at the opposition, as the Conservative Party ruling from 1996 to 2004 strongly opposed quotas.

practice. These various types of measures are further explained in detail and illustrated with examples of good practice.

However, a general rule is that the more concrete suggestions for improving gender balance in political decision-making, the less binding the document. Similarly, solutions that are far-reaching in terms of changing male standards only figure in documents without binding value. And the more imperative a solution, the less far-reaching it is, which is nicely illustrated by the communication the Commission addresses to the Member States in July 2000 on achieving a gender balance within its committees and expert groups. The Commission actively wants to promote equality. The communication defines 'balanced participation' as a 40% 'minimum level of participation of women or men in committees and expert groups'. Hence, the equality of women, of which the European Community considers itself to be a prime promoter, is defined as a participation of minimum 40% of women in the committees and expert groups. The communication specifies that in order to achieve this goal, four candidates should be put forward for each position, among which should be at least one of each sex. The communication is a good example of how abstract principles of equality can be progressively diluted when put into practice.

The document also reveals two other important features of how solutions are framed. Firstly, most concrete solutions exclusively frame the issue in visible results or in quantitative terms. Secondly, most governments and EU institutions see but a supportive role for themselves when it comes to achieving a gender balance. With respect to the first, as the goal is to increase the number of women in decision-making, the mechanism mentioned in most of the cases is quotas. Quotas and target figures appear in all four cases as a major solution, but in some cases like Spain where quotas are put into question or are not permitted in the official discourse, solutions are more abstract. They consist in encouraging women to participate but are still targeted to a numerical increase of women in decision-making positions. In the Dutch case, where the 2000 midterm policy plan on emancipation set a number of target figures[5], reaching them becomes the goal, illustrating well the quantification of the issue.

The second feature that was mentioned, i.e. the lack of concrete and far-reaching solutions, is shown by the fact that governments and EU institutions see but a supportive role for themselves. They have to create the climate allowing for a promotion of women in political decision-making, by providing conditions such as earmarked financial support. The Dutch government passes the buck on to political parties; the EU considers that the responsibility is mainly with the Member States. In the Greek case parliament and MPs are considered to be the main actors, which is due to the fact that the issue at stake is the voting of a quotas bill. The same goes for the Spanish debates on quotas.

When concrete solutions have a high chance of being put into practice, women are statistical variables, and the issue is one of counting and increasing their number without taking gender into account. Target figures or quotas are set without concretely tackling the causes of women's position in political decision-making. A nice illustration of this is the Dutch focus on reaching target figures. The male standard depicted in problem diagnosis filters through the framing of solutions as well, such as in the Dutch debate on pregnancy and maternity leave. Initially meant to be a supportive measure for women, participation in international organisations such as UN delegations is excluded from it. The government thereby stresses the need for representatives to be present, not allowing for a 'civil service mentality' (Lamoen and Yeuken 2004). A measure meant to improve a gender balance does not question the standard only reachable for people not having (to care for) children.

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[5] By 2010 there should be 50% women in the national parliament, the European parliament and the provincial councils, and 45% women in municipal councils. Cabinets should count 50% women; there should be 40% city mayors, and 30% commissioners of the Queen (Lamoen and Yeuken 2004).

Another indicator that gender is not really taken into account in the way the solution is framed is that there is a tendency to consider almost exclusively women as the target group of the solutions proposed. Although diagnosis contains some analysis about women's low numbers based on social structures and gender relations, most solutions are specifically targeted at women; in other words, the solution depends on them.

The various cases considered present a number of shifts over time, but there are no significant shifts in the framing of wo/men's position in political decision-making that could reveal the effective adoption of a gender mainstreaming approach. On the contrary, the case of the EU reveals a shift away from a broad and comprehensive gender mainstreaming approach. While right after 1995 documents recognise the need for a comprehensive integrated approach of the problem of women's low numbers in political decision-making, more recent texts focus on quotas for women as a target group. However, this shift of framing does not illustrate the fact that the EU buried a gender mainstreaming approach. It actually reveals that it never adopted one when it comes to achieving a gender balance in political decision-making. The shift in framing is due to the fact that more recent documents are less of a general statement and contain more concrete measures to be taken.

In Spain, the official discourse on quotas has recently changed due to the radical shift provoked by general elections in March 2004. The newly elected Spanish Socialist Government not only has traditionally been in favour of quotas, but has also provided some explicit signs of the importance it wants to give to women's participation in politics (parity among ministers, the first woman vice-president). However, although the political context has clearly become more favourable, solutions are still framed in almost exclusively quantitative terms without containing a gender mainstreaming approach.

The Dutch case contains no fundamental shift when it comes to framing solutions. Issues such as diversity are not elaborated on in the solutions, which focus on the number of women. Potential openings for a gender mainstreaming approach such as the proposal of a pregnancy and maternity leave are not seized to tackle problems in a more comprehensive context. On the contrary, they further entrench male standards and prerogatives. In the Greek case there seem to be no shifts in framing solutions either.

5 Women in political decision-making and the benchmarking fallacy

In order to cover a gender mainstreaming approach, the position of wo/men in political decision-making should have been dealt with in more general terms, i.e. policy texts should provide an analysis of structures and processes that contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality in politics. Thus, we attempted to clarify in the four cases considered the extent to which the issue been dealt with in general terms instead of specific ones, the extent to which the various documents focus broader than the social category of women, and the extent to which traditional definitions of gender were challenged, for instance in the organisation of work and time, parental roles or family structures, and institutional practices. Finally, we explored what did (not) get problematised regarding the issue of women's participation in politics, especially when it comes to gender relations, and which presuppositions were embedded in the construction of problems and solutions.

On the whole, and with the exception of the European Union, there are no significant shifts in the framing of wo/men's position in political decision-making that could reveal the effective adoption of a gender mainstreaming approach. Most documents still approach the topic as a specific policy issue, focusing on women without taking the larger context into account. Whenever this is not done at the level of problem definition, the broader focus gets lost when it comes to solving the problem. In many cases the problem itself is defined as

women's under-representation in politics, but its opposite, i.e. men's 'over-representation', is not mentioned. The issue is simply one of too few women, not of too many men. The single focus on women can, in several cases, be found back in the problem's causes, which implies that women must assume their responsibility and act (either by going into politics or by helping other women to enter politics).

Interestingly, however, and in contrast to the way in which the issue is generally dealt with, the justification and explanation of the problem of women's low numbers is often framed in broader terms than the problem itself. The problem is mainly justified because it reveals a deficient functioning of democracy or a non-compliance with the principle of equality. These arguments imply a questioning of their prevailing conceptualisation. Democracy, as put forward in the justification for women's low numbers as problematic, implies the participation of both sexes and therefore a challenging of the ideas or identities on which representation has been based. In the same order equality implies a putting into question of the abstract and formal definition of citizens. However, reference to concepts such as democracy and equality underlines the existence of noble-minded goals rather than the concrete questioning of founding principles and how their conceptualisation influences gender relations.

The explanation of the causes of women's low numbers also reveals a broader perspective on the issue than a narrow focus on women. Examples of this are the recurrent references to structural factors, implying that the problem situates itself outside individual women. Reference is made to electoral systems, to party systems and structures, and their differential impact on men and women. The same goes for gender-related role and task divisions, the patriarchal structure of society, or more broadly attitudes and social behaviour that refer to the extent to which gender regimes shape individual life choices. Mentioned but not explored in depth, gender regimes are for instance sketched as the bogeyman but not put into question. And whenever the latter is the case, the document has no binding value, like the EU brochure on how to close the gender gap in politics. Even more revealing for the lack of diagnosis is the fact that problem analysis is often missing. Diagnosis might by definition be less elaborated than prognosis in policy documents, but the pro-active approach of gender mainstreaming on gender regimes requires a sound knowledge of their current shaping and reproduction (see also Verloo and Roggeband 2004). Neither does a limited focus on problem analysis in policy documents imply that the actual causes are left aside in the delineation of solutions (see infra).

The broad approach of problem diagnosis is not prolonged in the way gender is dealt with. In most cases sex is a quantifiable variable and women are addressed as a social category. Gender relations are pointed at as one of the causes of women's low numbers, but they are not challenged. In several cases the traditional gender roles are even crystallised out. The Greek debate on quotas, for instance, did not challenge the traditional gender regime but was limited to find a way to help women get more involved in political decision-making within the setting of traditional gender roles. Moreover, the traditionally different gender role of women was meant to justify their participation in politics. The same goes for other cases, especially European documents, in which traditional gender roles are presented in a way that legitimises their essentialist perception. The argument that a balanced participation of women in decision-making will lead to the consideration of the interests and needs of the entire population awards to sex intrinsic interests and needs as well as their perception and articulation. The fact that women are needed in order to look after their own interests and needs implies a shortcoming of men at this level.

While gender regimes are not put into question in most cases, action is often guided by stereotyped conceptions of gender. Stereotyped (and essentialist) definitions of gender imply narrow conceptions of women and men conceived as unchangeable and based on a given

"essence". This by definition undermines a gender mainstreaming perspective, which is meant to (have the potential to) tackle traditional gender regimes. The challenging of traditional roles implies the recognition that they are changeable and thus have no given nature. Gender mainstreaming requires the presupposition that men, women and their relations are socially constructed and shaped and can therefore be de- and reconstructed. Otherwise a gender mainstreaming approach cannot have a transformative impact on traditional gender relations and misses its main aim. Indeed, when gender mainstreaming is applied in a way that does not aim at challenging traditional gender roles, like in the case of women's presence in decision-making, the radical potential of the strategy is limited.

Central to the dealing with gender is the fact that the extent to which society and politics are guided by a male standard is not put into question. On the contrary, it is presupposed to be the norm, be it not overtly or explicitly. The problem with framing equality as assimilation is precisely the existence of an unquestioned male norm that women must either imitate or be compensated for not attaining (Mackinnon 1987). Any difference from such an absolute norm is interpreted and treated as deviance, anomaly, and inferiority. The taken for granted attitude towards the male standard is shown in the fact that men are no part of the picture. In several cases the male standard is not even recognised, while most cases frame the issue as 'women lagging behind men'. Some of the reasons explaining this lagging behind of women touch upon the male standard, such as the recognition that the requirements for candidates are 'to be like men'. However, the male standard is broadly accepted as given, as is shown in the Dutch framing of a replacement arrangement for politicians on pregnancy and delivery leave. The problem of women lagging behind needs to be overcome, but the solution proposed does not target the roots of the latter. On the contrary, in many cases prognosis strengthens the male standard. Men are not requested to make any effort let alone to change: the gender gap must be tackled and closed by women.

In sum, the main problem at the level of diagnosis consists in a lack of gender analysis putting into question basic assumptions structuring the current gender regimes. The dominant framing of the problem has an impact on the solutions suggested. Solutions, whenever concrete, focus on women as statistical variables, and the issue is one of counting and increasing their number without actually taking gender into account. Quotas and target figures appear in all four cases as a major solution without tackling the causes of the problem. The lack of linking problem diagnosis and prognosis is also shown in the fact that pointing at different causes does not withhold most actors to suggest the same type of solution, namely quotas and target figures. While some solutions presented could actually offer opportunities for a gender mainstreaming approach, such as the Dutch pregnancy and delivery leave or the more global approach of the EU brochure and the EWL position paper, those finally approved and put into practice simply frame the issue in quantitative terms leaving aside a broader perspective.

There are several explanations for the emphasis on numbers in the prognosis. Specific policy issues facilitate their quantification. The easiness with which they can be quantified opens the door for a problem analysis and solution without tackling underlying structural problems. This goes for the position of wo/men in political decision-making, focusing on the number of women candidates instead of tackling the gendered character of political systems, structures and traditions, nor the assumptions on which the functioning of society is based.

The strategic framing of women's position in political decision-making is well-illustrated in the Greek case, in respect to the importance of the audience on the framing of the issue. The problem tends to be presented as a democracy issue when the pro-quota speaker addresses an audience such as the Greek Parliament, as a way to pass legislation through. In other occasions the problem is mainly presented as an equality issue. Also, due to the male dominated context in which the issue of women's position in political decision-making must

find its way, gender advocates have chosen to frame it in the easiest and less aggressive terms, so to be accepted by male policy makers: numbers. The emphasis on numbers reduces the complexities of the question and, above all, does not explicitly question the male privileged position of power in representative political institutions.

The strategic framing of the issue in terms of numbers also works the other way around: quantifying the issue can be a conscious policy strategy to act while not profoundly wanting to change the status quo. There is also the need for politicians to score points. Quotas or target figures are visible measures and rising numbers of women in politics are easily awarded to them, even though reality is more complex. Finally, the quantification of the issue of women's position in politics also corresponds to the trend to quantify policy-making as such, by monitoring and benchmarking. The reasons for falling into the trap of a benchmarking fallacy are numerous and apparently it happens to politicians or policy makers regardless of gender.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper consisted in analysing how the issue of gender relations in political decision-making has been dealt with throughout the last decade in a number of EU Member States and at the EU level itself. Referring to Bacchi's 'what's the problem' approach, we looked at the extent to which the position of wo/men in political decision-making was tackled from a gender mainstreaming perspective, both at the level of problem diagnosis and prognosis. We found that women are the problem, as they are lagging behind men, and women should make the effort to change and adapt to the patriarchal political institutions in the broad sense of the term in order to become part of the game. Men are not a problem and their role should not be questioned. If a gender mainstreaming approach requires a deep change of policy areas, processes, actors, and particularly a look into the interrelated character of gender (i.e. the fact that the role and life style of one gender affects the life opportunities of the other), a focus limited on 'women lagging behind men' does not go in the right direction. Still, there are some signs of a broader systemic approach to the issue: the reference to patriarchal society, gender roles or electoral systems when searching the causes for women's "under-representation". However, they are general references, with no deep analysis and no impact on the solutions proposed. There has not been a shift towards such a gender mainstreaming approach in the last decade, even though the strategy has been promoted and wo/men in political decision-making might be an easy field for mainstreaming gender. An explanation of why this might not have happened is what we call a benchmarking fallacy of policy issues where members of at least one sex are easy to trace and target. In such a case, sex as a social category becomes easy to tackle and complex gender issues can be left aside. It is noteworthy that, in spite of their differences of origin, in relation to the socio-economic realities and gender regimes of the respective countries, the analysed texts present important similarities in respect to all the above shortcomings.

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