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Unpacking the discursive construction of gender in higher education: contending approaches and policy silences

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In this article, I argue for the need to scrutinize policy discourses in education, as they shape which issues are deemed relevant and legitimate, and which are marginalized or omitted. I take the case of Catalonia, where policies promote the introduction of a so-called ‘gender perspective’ in university teaching as part of a series of gender equality initiatives. Particularly, I unpack the discursive construction of such ‘gender perspective,’ focusing on the inclusions, but also on the tensions and policy silences. Drawing on an analysis of a policy document and semi-structured interviews, I show the complex interplay of contending, yet coexisting approaches to gender equality (including ‘equality as sameness’, ‘difference’ and ‘transformation’), and discuss the power relations involved in the policymaking processes. A discursive analysis of education policies proves relevant in questioning and critically examining what is frequently presented as a ‘neutral’ and ‘depoliticized’ issue, an empty shell, reduced to an unproblematized buzzword.

Keywords: gender; teaching; higher education; discourse analysis; education policy; policy analysis; Catalonia

Introduction

For over 40 years, encouraged by the demands of feminist movements worldwide, political actors and institutions across different scales have highlighted the gendered dynamics that affect education (Monkman & Webster, 2015). Especially since the 1970s, several conventions, plans, and projects for gender equality have included specific references to education, such as the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UNGA, 1979). Additionally, following the 1995 UN Beijing Declaration, the move towards ‘gender mainstreaming’—i.e., the strategy of incorporating gender equality perspectives into all stages of policy processes—has influenced many social policy initiatives across various institutions, including the European Union (Jacquot, 2015; True & Mintrom, 2001). This trend has extended to policy mandates in education, making policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities and injustices somewhat central to global education policy agendas (Lahelma, 2014; Monkman & Hoffman, 2013). In this context, it is unsurprising that many national and regional governments have formulated policies to promote gender equality across all education levels, including higher education.

This is the case of Catalonia, an autonomous region of Spain. As part of a broader raft of gender equality initiatives, several policies have been introduced—both at the Catalan and Spanish levels¹—to integrate a so-called ‘gender perspective’² in university teaching. In fact, since the enactment of the Catalan Equality Law in 2015 (Act 17/2015), this has become mandatory across all academic disciplines and is a requisite for the accreditation³ of degrees by the Catalan University Quality-Assurance Agency (AQU) (Benito & Verge, 2020; Verge, 2020, 2021). Put differently, the agency responsible for evaluating and licensing university programs in the region has included

¹ Spain’s political organization is often described as quasi-federal (Rius-Ulldemolins & Zamorano, 2015). ‘Catalan’ and ‘Spanish’ policies refer to regional and country-wide policies, respectively.

² In Catalonia and Spain, this term (often translated as ‘gender lens’) refers to considering how gender shapes patterns of inequality and *lived* experiences. While policies use it in the singular (‘perspectiva de gènere’ in Catalan or ‘de género’ in Spanish), I sometimes use the plural to acknowledge the diversity of ‘gender perspectives’ when not directly citing policy language.

³ This encompasses the quality-assurance processes throughout a degree course’s life cycle—i.e., ex-ante assessment, monitoring, modification, and ex-post accreditation (AQU, 2016).

the incorporation of ‘gender perspective’ in the set of criteria for program accreditation. Furthermore, to provide universities with guidelines and recommendations regarding this measure, AQU published in 2018 the ‘General Framework for Incorporating the Gender Perspective in Higher Education Teaching’ [henceforth referred to as ‘General Framework’] (AQU, 2018). As some have noted, Catalonia makes a distinctive case both within Spain and across Europe, as the link between gender equality measures and university quality assurance is uncommon and represents a sort of ‘policy innovation’ (Benito & Verge, 2020).

Yet, the meaning of ‘gender perspective’ is not straightforward and frequently lacks an explicit definition. In this article, I understand policies as ‘representations of knowledge and power’ (Maguire et al., 2011, p. 597), and argue for the need to scrutinize policy discourses in education, as they actively shape which issues are deemed relevant and legitimate, and which are marginalized or omitted. Policies fostering gender equality, such as the one I analyze in this article, ‘can be studied as clusters of contesting views on addressing the gender problematic’ due to the heterogeneous and often conflicting understandings of gender equality among different actors (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 22). Particularly, this article examines the discursive construction of ‘gender perspective in university teaching’ within policy in Catalonia, unpacking the underlying approaches to gender equality as well as the identified policy ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ (Bacchi, 2009). I examine not only the inclusions but also the omissions and underlying tensions, focusing on both what is visible and the policy silences (Allan, 2008; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). In short, rather than distilling a normative definition of ‘gender perspective’, my goal is to critically unpack the discursive construction of what this notion stands for in higher education policy in Catalonia.

In the next section, I provide some notes on the research process and materials. Next, I explain the analytical and conceptual frameworks that guide the analysis: my approach to the discursive analysis of policies and the conceptualization of different ways of understanding gender equality. I then present the main insights deriving from the analysis, where I explore the discursive construction of ‘gender perspective’ in teaching in Catalonia. The insights section is divided into two subsections: the first of them analyzes the 2018 General Framework published by AQU to offer guidelines on integrating the ‘gender perspective.’ I explore both the underlying approaches to gender equality and the tensions among them, as well as the policy problems and solutions included in the document. The second subsection goes a bit further: it explores what lies behind the General Framework to delve into these tensions, focusing on the process of creating the document and the actors who participated. In the concluding remarks, I highlight the main contributions and engage in a dialogue with the literature to point towards future lines of research.

Research process and materials

I take the 2018 General Framework as the central policy document for the analysis. This document is particularly relevant because it offers universities and faculty guidelines on integrating the ‘gender perspective’ in response to the mandates included in the 2015 Catalan Equality Law. Consequently, it encapsulates AQU’s definition of ‘gender perspective’ in teaching, incorporates significant discourse on the construction of policy problems and solutions, and discursively sets the frame for accrediting bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Moreover, I engaged in 18 semi-structured interviews with key informants involved in the production of the General Framework. Their participation ranged from

direct involvement (e.g., members of the working group who wrote the document) to a more indirect link to the policymaking process (e.g., actors involved in the production of the Equality Law, members of the Women and Science Committee,⁴ members of AQU). The interviews were facilitated between September and November 2022 and focused on the policymaking process as well as on the debates and conflicts that emerged. Such a focus on the process of policy production was useful to move beyond merely mapping policy discourses to also consider the context that shaped the emergence and predominance of certain discourses (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007), in line with critical policy sociology.

Regarding analysis, the interpretative process was informed by the analytical and conceptual frameworks but was predominantly inductive, following an approach that considers ‘an iterative relationship between conceptual frameworks, data analysis, and interpretation’ (Allan, 2008, p. 43). This involved multiple readings of the materials, during which I noted recurring concepts and significant observations, including the main approaches to gender equality and feminisms (e.g., liberal, radical, poststructuralist feminisms; binary and non-binary understandings; presence or absence of intersectional approaches), as well as the problematic areas where gender (in)equality manifests in education (e.g., bibliography, stereotypes, language) and the identified solutions (i.e., diagnosis and prognosis). Some initial categories that emerged during preliminary analysis were modified, grouped or added during subsequent coding. For instance, the initial categories referring to approaches to gender equality and feminisms were refined and grouped, informed by the categorization of gender equality as

⁴The Women and Science Committee of the Inter-University Council of Catalonia performs both agenda-setting and oversight roles for gender equality policies in universities (Verge, 2020).

‘sameness,’ ‘difference,’ and ‘transformation’ presented later in this article. Other initial categories regarding the policy problems and solutions, such as those related to methods and evaluation, were merged due to significant overlap in the data, which suggested that analyzing them separately would fragment the analysis. Additionally, new categories not initially identified—such as horizontal segregation—emerged in subsequent processes. Therefore, in line with critical epistemology, the process of generating and interpreting materials was non-linear and reflexive, which allowed for constant revision, expansion, and reconceptualization of the materials (Rubin, 2021).

The next two sections outline the analytical and conceptual frameworks guiding the analysis: first, I detail my approach to the discursive analysis of policies and, second, the conceptualization of gender equality employed in the article.

Towards a discursive analysis of policies

This study builds on the tradition of critical studies of education policies, particularly on critical policy sociology (Ball, 2015; Ozga, 2021; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). That is, I focus on the politics of (higher) education policy while understanding education policy as politics (Ozga, 2021). In this regard, acknowledging that the production of education policies is inextricably linked to power relations (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), I conceptualize policymaking as a complex, non-linear process that entails struggle over meanings and interpretations (Hyatt, 2013). Consequently, a discursive analysis of policies is particularly relevant to processes of social transformation and change, as ‘the process of representing and constructing such transformations is discursive’ (Hyatt, 2013, p. 837). From this standpoint, policies can be conceived as discursive interventions that, rather than only reproducing and reflecting the social world, also produce and create subjectivities, hierarchies, and taxonomies for interpreting and

understanding it (Allan, 2008; Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 2015). In fact, by adopting singular interpretations of what the problem at stake is (Bacchi, 2009), policy discourses ‘cause certain perspectives and states of affairs to come to seem or be taken as “normal” or “natural” and others to seem or be taken as “deviant” or “marginal”’ (Hyatt, 2013, p. 837). Consequently, a discursive analysis of policies aims to unpack and uncover ‘the norms embedded in particular constructions, which reflect taken-for-granted beliefs and hegemonic assumptions’ (Lombardo et al., 2016, p. 5; Bacchi, 2009).

Within the broader framework of critical policy sociology, I mainly draw on insights from Critical Frame Analysis (Verloo et al., 2007; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007) to examine how policy discursively constructs ‘gender perspective in university teaching.’⁵ This approach draws upon theoretical notions from gender studies, social movement theory, and public policy—including Carol Bacchi’s renowned ‘What’s the Problem?’ approach (2009)—and shares similarities with other approaches to policy discourse analysis (e.g., Allan, 2008). Critical Frame Analysis focuses on policy ‘frames,’ understood as the various ways in which a policy problem and its proposed solution are constructed. Accordingly, this approach emphasizes analyzing the ‘diagnosis’—i.e., how the *problem* is framed—and the associated ‘prognosis’—i.e., how the *solution* is framed. Additionally, and most important for this study, it emphasizes the relevance of problematizing how discourse constructs the meaning of ‘gender’ and focuses on the aspect of ‘voice’—i.e., questioning which voices are included or excluded from the framing of policy problems and solutions (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). This approach underscores the need not only to explore *what*

⁵ Furthermore, the study incorporates insights from other approaches, including the Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Framework (Hyatt, 2013)—particularly regarding modes of legitimization—, and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007)—regarding gendered power relations.

appears—i.e., the explicit or implicit construction of policy problems and the proposed solutions (Bacchi, 2009; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007)—, but also the gaps and absences—i.e., the *policy silences*, what is not problematized. This is key to ‘reveal how policy reinforces normalcy/deviance, as well as constructs normative frameworks about how to solve social problems through policy’ (Allan, 2008, p. 10). Importantly, Critical Frame Analysis aims not only to identify the major and minor frames but also the nuances of the frames and the potential inconsistencies and tensions (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). These principles will guide the discursive analysis of the materials, as shown later in the article.

While Critical Frame Analysis is effective for mapping discourses, it has limitations in explaining why certain frames emerged in their current form, the contexts in which they developed, and the conditions that allowed specific discourses to gain dominance (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). For this reason, integrating Critical Frame Analysis within the broader framework of critical policy sociology not only addresses these gaps but also deepens our understanding of the processes shaping policy production, revealing the tensions, silences, and dynamics that underlie the emergence of specific frames (Ball, 2015; Ozga, 2021).

Approaching gender equality: sameness, difference, transformation and beyond

The introduction of gender perspectives in teaching is part of a broader array of policies to achieve gender equality. Therefore, the discursive construction of ‘gender perspective’ in Catalonia is arguably determined by the underlying approaches to how ‘gender equality’ is framed. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that there is not a single definition or a single way of understanding these concepts (Lazar, 2007; Lombardo et al., 2016; Verloo et al., 2007). In fact, throughout history and across geographies,

different feminist currents and schools of thought have conceptualized sex and gender in varied ways, with significant implications for education (Acker, 1987). In the so-called Western countries, these currents include feminisms labelled as liberal, radical, socialist/Marxist, cultural, intersectional, decolonial, postmodern, trans and queer, among others (Beasley, 2005; Curiel, 2019; Epure, 2014; Kwachou, 2022; Trujillo, 2022; Vergès, 2019). It is worth noting that not all these currents are mutually exclusive, but rather form a sort of continuum with overlaps, complex differences, discrepancies, and internal debates (see, e.g., Hybris, 2022; Williams, 2016). In this regard, the foci of feminist analyses and their understandings of gender equality are not monolithic but varied and heterogeneous. Thus, the ‘gender perspective’ portrayed in policies reflects these diverse understandings.

Given this complexity, to shed light on the framing of ‘gender perspective’ in university teaching, I draw on the categorization of approaches to gender equality proposed by authors such as Judith Squires, Mieke Verloo, Emanuela Lombardo, and Teresa Rees. According to this categorization—which is not exhaustive—, there are at least three main approaches to gender equality, namely ‘gender equality as sameness,’ ‘gender equality as difference,’ and ‘gender equality as transformation.’

First, ‘equality as sameness’ focuses on equal opportunities and non-discrimination (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007), and is strongly connected to liberal feminisms (Acker, 1987; Beasley, 2005). This approach starts from the premise that all people have the right to the same opportunities and should be treated according to the same principles and standards. The identified problem is that women have been excluded from several social spaces due to unequal opportunities and treatment, but ‘the solution proposed is to include them in the world as it is, without challenging the underlying male norm’ (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 23). This approach has been

characterized by some as ‘inclusion’ (Squires, 1999) or ‘tinkering’ (Rees, 1998, 1999), in the sense that it promotes small changes without questioning the structure. This is one of the major critiques of liberal feminisms: that they do not challenge the deeper structural inequalities and simply aim to fit women into existing male-dominated frameworks (Acker, 1987; Beasley, 2005).

Second, ‘equality as difference’ is more aligned with feminist perspectives labelled as radical and cultural (Beasley, 2005). It focuses mainly on the category ‘women’ (Squires, 2005), and ‘problematizes the existence of an unquestioned male norm that women must either imitate or be compensated for not attaining (Mackinnon, 1987)’ (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 23). Therefore, it aims at recognizing ‘(women’s) non-hegemonic gendered identities that have been treated as different in comparison to male normative identities and cultures’ (p. 23). Put differently, this perspective seeks to acknowledge how the male norm positions women as subordinate, and to recognize a specific female gendered identity (Squires, 2005). To do so, it highlights the need for specific measures rather than striving for identical treatment. Consequently, it is not surprising that affirmative action—understood as, e.g., gender quotas, compensatory mechanisms, etc.—mainly derives from this approach (Rees, 2010). Some authors have also named this approach ‘reversal’ (Squires, 1999) and ‘tailoring’ (Rees, 1998, 1999), meaning that it proposes compensatory adjustments or exceptions specifically made for women. However, a word of caution is necessary in this regard since this approach may run the risk of falling into essentialist views of what it means to be ‘a woman’, thereby excluding the realities of, for example, non-white and trans and non-binary people (see, e.g., hooks, 1981; Trujillo, 2022).

Finally, the ‘equality as transformation’ approach (Rees, 1998, 1999, 2010⁶; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007) or ‘displacement’ (Squires, 1999) revolves around ‘subject positions’ and ‘gendering (as a verb) rather than gender (as a noun), and espouse a diversity politics’ (Squires, 2005, p. 368). The proposed solution, more in line with postmodern and queer feminisms (Beasley, 2005), is to deconstruct ‘political discourses that engender the subject’ (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007, p. 33). The key idea here is that beyond the exclusion of women or the existence of a masculine norm, this approach problematizes the gendered world itself and questions established categories and meanings (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). Therefore, ‘equality as transformation’ is more aligned with questioning binary constructions of gender, unlike the approaches above that focus more on equality between *two* groups, ‘women’ and ‘men.’ Furthermore, this third approach does not understand women and men as homogenous groups but recognizes the differences among women and among men (Rees, 1998). Additionally, although ‘equality as transformation’ does not always focus centrally on systems of power such as racism or classism, it ‘seeks to accommodate both gender and other dimensions of discrimination and disadvantage’ (Rees, 1998, p. 38).

Considering this last point, it is important to problematize that these approaches—particularly the first two—can be seen as rather one-dimensional, as they often focus on gender independently from other social systems of domination. Several feminist currents have indeed criticized white feminist movements for decades for not paying sufficient attention to the complex interplays or intersections between gender and these other systems. This critique is present, for instance, in intersectional feminisms, which focus on racism and classism; decolonial and anti-imperialist

⁶ Rees calls the approach ‘transforming.’

feminisms, which address colonial and imperial systems; trans and queer feminisms, which challenge cis-heterosexism; and crip feminisms, which confront ableism, among others (see, e.g., Curiel, 2019; Davis, 1981; Filigrana, 2021; Hill Collins, 1990; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Kafer, 2013; Trujillo, 2022; Vergès, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The critique is that by ignoring these intersections, some feminist movements risk excluding the voices, identities, realities, and experiences of people who do not fit into the narrow category of ‘the woman’ (for further discussions on exclusions in some feminist movements, see Koyama, 2020; Mayor et al., 2020; Serano, 2013).

Again, it is worth noting that these categories, although analytically distinct, must not be understood as being exclusive and ‘incompatible’; on the contrary, they are ‘cumulative and complementary’ (Squires, 2005, p. 370). Gender equality as sameness, difference and transformation can—and, in fact, do—coexist at the policy level, and political debates often contain arguments and demands from these three approaches. Still, this conceptualization is useful to shed light on the analysis of the discursive construction of the ‘gender perspective in university teaching in Catalonia’, which is addressed in the following section.

The discursive construction of ‘gender perspective in university teaching’ in Catalonia: main insights

As previously mentioned, I take the 2018 General Framework as a central document for analyzing the discursive construction of ‘gender perspective in university teaching’ in Catalonia. This document is not only intended as a guide for faculty and universities but also details how AQU conceptualizes ‘gender perspective.’ In this section, I present the main insights derived from the analysis. First, I focus on analyzing the General Framework, examining both the underlying approaches to gender equality and the

tensions between them, as well as the ‘policy problems’ and ‘solutions’ it proposes.

Later, in the second subsection, I delve further into these approaches and tensions by exploring the document’s creation process and the actors involved.

The General Framework: inclusions and silences

Exploring the main approaches, inconsistencies, and tensions

Throughout this section, I will explore the *framing* of gender equality reflected in the 2018 General Framework. Far from being monolithic, the document contains a heterogeneous array of approaches, which gives rise to tensions and inconsistencies. One of the most evident manifestations of these complexities can be found in the definition of ‘gender perspective in university teaching.’

The 2018 General Framework states that “‘gender” is not synonymous with “sex” or “women.” Teaching with a gender perspective is not, therefore, teaching about women; rather, it considers sex and gender as key analytical and explanatory variables. (...) [It] takes into account both people’s biological characteristics (sex) and the social and cultural characteristics of women and men (gender)’ (AQU, 2018, p. 13). The definition continues by opposing discourses and ideologies that ‘establish a strict correspondence between biological sex and sexual orientation, as well as the socially expected gender identity and expression, classifying as “abnormal” individuals who are non-heterosexual, transgender, transsexual or gender-fluid’ (p. 13). It also states that the gender perspective ‘needs to be based on an intersectional approach’ (p. 13).

These statements bring forth two notable points. Firstly, this definition stands as one of the few explicit definitions available for understanding ‘gender perspective in university teaching.’ Secondly, it suggests a departure from ‘sameness’ or ‘difference’

approaches, leaning more towards an understanding more associated with ‘transformation’—in line with problematizing the gendered world itself, moving beyond binarism, and accommodating other dimensions of discrimination (Rees, 1998). Nevertheless, the move towards ‘transformation’ in the definition and the mention of intersectionality and gender-fluid individuals collide to some extent with the main approach in the document: ‘difference’ and, to a lesser extent, ‘sameness,’ as we will examine throughout this section.

These tensions surface in the document sections that provide examples for each area of expertise. For instance, in the area of Health Sciences, the focus narrows to a binary distinction between women and men (p. 45), with a substantial emphasis on the biological and physical aspects—with examples referring to, e.g., sex differences in illness and the impact of ‘stereotypes assumed during socialisation ... on the body (cells, hormones and organs)’ (p. 45). Mentions related to ‘transformation’ are scarce beyond the reference to intersectionality included across all areas of expertise—i.e., identifying ‘the intersection of gender inequality with other dimensions of inequality (age, class, race, sexuality and gender identity/expression, ableness, etc.)’ as a learning outcome (pp. 29, 34, 38, 44, 48, 53). For its part, in the area of Arts and Humanities, the main approach still focuses on addressing inequalities between men and women mostly from a ‘difference’ approach (p. 26). Yet, it also acknowledges as part of ‘gender perspective’ mentions such as ‘the work that challenges the power relationships and gender norms produced by feminist and LGBTI and queer artists’ (p. 30).

That is, despite the broad scope of the definition, considerations beyond the ‘women and men’ paradigm—sometimes even presented from a somewhat homogenizing standpoint—still occupy a peripheral position. Put differently, the document leaves ‘transformation’ approaches—closer to intersectional or queer

perspectives—outside of the centrality of ‘gender perspective’. ‘Transformation’ approaches do appear, but more as peripheral or add-on considerations. As noted, it is mainly ‘difference’ approaches that adhere to binary understandings which occupy the core. Examining these diverse perspectives on gender equality is crucial, as they underpin and shape the construction of ‘gender perspective’ in university teaching. We now turn to a more in-depth analysis of this construction.

Unpacking ‘gender perspective in university teaching’

To unpack the concept of ‘gender perspective,’ I explore the key areas of concern that the General Framework highlights as manifestations of gender inequality, for which it proposes specific ‘solutions.’ These areas also reflect the underlying approaches to gender equality—and the tensions between them—that have been previously discussed. From the analysis, eight main problematic areas emerge, detailed in order of centrality as follows: (a) gender blindness, (b) inclusions and exclusions in the syllabi, (c) gender roles and stereotypes, (d) gender discrimination and violence, (e) methods and evaluation, (f) language, (g) power relations, and (h) horizontal segregation.

The first of these areas has to do with *gender unawareness*—often referred to as *gender blindness*.⁷ According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2016), cited in the General Framework, ‘gender blindness is the lack of recognition that the roles and responsibilities of women/girls and men/boys are attributed or imposed in specific social, cultural, economic and political contexts’ (AQU, 2018, p. 14). Gender blindness, as the document states, affects university teaching. The ‘problem’ to be addressed, in this sense, has to do with the ‘overgeneralization of phenomena studied from men’s experiences, thus rendering the reality of women invisible’ and with ‘a false

⁷ This term has been criticized for its potential ableist implications.

representation of women's behaviour, attitudes and needs as deviating from the ideal male model' (p. 14). Therefore, some of the proposed 'solutions' involve recommending the inclusion of authors' full names to make visible that not all of them are men; teaching students how to 'produce, collect, and interpret empirical data in a gender-sensitive way' (p. 29); teaching students to use and create qualitative and quantitative indicators to understand gender inequalities, social, political, and economic structures and processes; teaching students to use the sex/gender category at an epistemological level in the production of knowledge and subjectivities; and teaching students to recognize gender biases, androcentrism, and sexism in different aspects related to fields of expertise, including the labour market, social policies, institutions, and educational materials.

Relatedly, the second highlighted area concerns *inclusions and exclusions in the syllabi*. The document constructs as 'problematic' the gender imbalance among the authors included in the bibliography and the readings featured in a course's syllabus—i.e., the relatively little weight given to contributions made by female academics or authors—the devaluation of work produced by women, and the attribution of such work to their male colleagues (p. 18). As a 'solution', 'gender perspective' is understood as one that includes the legacy, experience, contributions, and social and cultural production of women in different fields of expertise; considers women's experience as a primary source of knowledge; balances the percentage of male and female authors in bibliographies; and highlights the absence of women in terms of materials and content (p. 21).

The third problematic area refers to *gender roles and stereotypes*. Aspects identified as 'problematic' include differentiated socialization based on individuals' sex; 'the existence of gender stereotypes in textbooks' (p. 38); the representation of women

based on stereotypes about their family and social roles or as passive objects of sexual desire; the idealized representation of male and female bodies; and the transmission of a set of gender and sexuality norms. In this context, ‘gender perspective in teaching’ is envisioned as one that emphasizes the promotion of critical reflection to recognize and address stereotypes, biases, and gender roles in different fields of knowledge; avoiding stereotypes in teaching materials and public documents; and critically examining the construction of symbols, images, and discourses associated with the perpetuation of specific models of femininity and masculinity (p. 26), among other aspects.

Although to a lesser extent, the fourth problematic area included as part of such a ‘gender perspective’ addresses *gender discrimination and violence*. In this case, the ‘solution’, as constructed in the document, involves designing actions to eliminate all ‘direct, indirect, or multiple discriminations on the grounds of sex, gender, or sexual orientation’ (p. 35), and prevent, identify, and analyze ‘the structural causes and effects of violence against women’ (p. 29). Additionally, as a fifth area, the document also addresses aspects related to *methods and evaluation*. This underscores the significance of employing inclusive and diversity-responsive teaching practices that are active, participatory, and gender-sensitive, and highlights the need to consider how methodologies and evaluation impact academic outcomes differently for women and men, and the role of gender in shaping classroom interactions.

The last three problematic areas highlighted as part of the construction of the ‘gender perspective in university teaching’ concern *language, power relations, and horizontal segregation*. Language is understood as a ‘sociocultural product that produces and reproduces gender relations at the symbolic level’ (p. 30) and is closely related to power. Therefore, according to the General Framework, gender perspectives in teaching should promote inclusive and non-sexist language. While the document

lacks clear definitions of this concept,⁸ it highlights the importance of language transcending androcentric forms and acknowledging power dynamics. In the case of the field of art, for instance, the document also points to the need to recognize the contributions of art in challenging power relations and gender norms, as well as highlighting feminist and queer artistic practices (p. 30). Lastly, regarding horizontal segregation, the gender composition of students and faculty in each area of expertise is also considered part of the problem that justifies introducing gender perspectives into teaching—albeit briefly mentioned. Thus, such perspectives involve helping students understand how gender influences their choice of studies, providing data on the gender distribution among students, faculty, and management positions, and developing actions to increase the number of students from the under-represented gender (p. 20).

Two main ideas can be drawn from the discussion above. First, the construction of ‘gender perspective’ mainly focuses on aspects such as gender unawareness and the androcentric biases in the curriculum, as well as the presence of gender roles and stereotypes. Thus, the framing of ‘gender perspective’ is primarily rooted in ‘difference’ approaches that focus on highlighting and criticizing the male norm and propose specific actions to balance its effects (e.g., balancing the percentage of male and female authors, and including authors’ full names); and, to a lesser extent, ‘sameness’ approaches that focus on promoting equal treatment and opportunities (e.g., avoiding stereotypes). As discussed throughout this section, while the document also mentions other elements (i.e., discrimination and violence, teaching methodologies and evaluation, inclusive language, power relations, and gender composition), they occupy a more secondary position. These observations reflect the tensions and inconsistencies

⁸ For a deeper debate about inclusive language in Catalan and Spanish, see Junyent (2021) and Vasallo (2021).

identified earlier in the analysis. Second, and relatedly, the elements that form the construction of ‘gender perspective’ are often presented without concise definitions, resulting in somewhat open-ended and superficial solutions, and tend to be more linked to raising awareness among faculty and students than to offering specific methodological recommendations.

Having explored the discursive construction of ‘gender perspective’ and the main approaches to gender equality in the General Framework, in the next section I will delve deeper into the context behind this document aiming at better understanding some of these approaches and the tensions among them.

The General Framework: understanding and explaining inconsistencies and tensions

The production of the 2018 General Framework provides a critical lens to examine how power relations and competing discourses shaped the framing of ‘gender perspective.’ Considering policies as representations of power and policymaking as a site of struggle over meaning (Braun et al., 2011; Hyatt, 2013), it was thus crucial to unravel the document’s production process, the visions of the involved actors, and the power relations that emerged during this process. Consequently, engaging in interviews with key actors involved in this policymaking process from different positions proved useful for explaining these tensions and inconsistencies and for engaging in a more in-depth examination of the power relations involved and the political context that shaped specific discourses (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007).

When examining the production process of the 2018 General Framework, a key aspect stands out. Following the enactment of the Catalan Equality Law in 2015—which stipulated that AQU would assess ‘gender perspective’ in the process of program accreditation—the Women and Science Committee, comprising representatives from

universities, research centres, and other autonomous agencies (Verge, 2020), tasked AQU with implementing initiatives to comply with this mandate. In response, AQU joined the committee's efforts and took on the responsibility of developing the General Framework to provide guidelines on how to implement the gender perspective. AQU, in turn, commissioned the drafting of this document to a group of actors, including academic experts from various fields and institutions, as well as representatives from Catalan public autonomous institutions. While this group was responsible for developing the content, AQU maintained oversight and ultimately approved the final version prior to its publication (Benito & Verge, 2020; Verge, 2020, 2021).

Thus, the production of the General Framework involved the participation of a relatively large group of actors. Importantly, these actors shared similar social positions; they were predominantly individuals generally recognized as cisgender, white women with a certain degree of privilege within academia and public institutions. Yet, they did not hold homogeneous perspectives on gender equality. Indeed, because of the lack of a uniform approach among these actors, the inconsistencies shown throughout the article regarding the construction of 'gender perspective' can be—at least in part—attributed to the collective impact of the diverse actors who contributed to its development. This is what I will illustrate throughout this section.

In this regard, one of the interviewees provided the following insight, shedding light on the differences and disagreements among the actors' positions, as well as the power dynamics at play in the construction of discourse—where hegemonic positions prevailed, and minority perspectives were relegated to the margins:

There were different approaches [among those involved in the production process].

I believe there might have been some deeper issues at play here... Some may have

stemmed from our different feminist backgrounds or from whether we had worked with the intersectional framework or not... Since the majority [leaned in a particular direction] ... it wasn't exactly a matter of voting, but it became evident that you can't keep on pushing [one's own viewpoint]. (Interview 3).

The final sentence in this quotation reflects both the struggle to mobilize certain approaches over others, and the relatively marginalized status of some of these approaches—e.g., those grounded in postmodern, queer, and intersectional feminisms—in contrast to the prevailing positions, more closely aligned with binary 'difference' perspectives. This dynamic illustrates how power operates in policymaking processes, favouring discourses aligned with the dominant social positions of the group. In other words, despite individual differences in approaches to gender equality, the overall lack of diversity of 'voices' within the group may have contributed to systemic biases—i.e., white and cis biases—during the document's production, influencing which approaches were central and which ones were more marginalized—thus becoming a 'policy silence' (Bacchi, 2009; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007).

These tensions in the group's approaches to gender equality also reflect broader struggles over meaning within the policymaking process. These struggles are further illustrated in the following example, where the dominance of binary perspectives becomes evident.

I think certain disciplines are not yet prepared to develop [a gender perspective beyond the binary approach] so we were only going to focus on what 'gender perspective' was, understanding it as man/woman in this case, and how it affected men and women. I really dislike the idea of binarism, because it's a label imposed by the LGBTI world... They have created a mess that is not good for them nor for us. (Interview 5).

This statement, made by an actor aligned with majority perspectives, illustrates how the dominant construction of ‘gender perspective’ in the General Framework is rooted in a binary understanding of gender, equating it with the man/woman dichotomy.

Furthermore, this approach is not presented as a mere perspective but rather as a normative ‘truth’—what gender perspective *is*—legitimizing it as universal while silencing alternative perspectives. This illustrates why the construction of ‘gender perspective’ in the General Framework does not centrally include the realities of non-binary people, nor a more nuanced analysis that considers the interrelations between, for instance, gender identity and expression, sex, and sexual orientation—or, put differently, the interplay between the man/woman axis and cis-heteronormativity. In fact, both axes are understood as separate, where the so-called ‘LGBTI world’ is constructed as a homogenous ‘they’—as opposed to a ‘we’—that has ‘imposed’ the ‘label’ of (non-)binarism, carrying with it clear negative connotations.

Notably, the actors aligned with hegemonic perspectives—i.e., ‘difference’ approaches, more related to radical and cultural feminisms—did not perceive substantial differences or conflicts in the approaches to ‘gender perspective’ among their fellows.

As another interviewee put it:

These radical [i.e., extremist] movements that we have now were not present at the time when we were developing [the General Framework]. And, from my perception, we are in a time of tension and not of understanding. So, I did not perceive [conflict] at that time, nor was there any debate. And we were guided by the definition of what is understood as ‘gender perspective’ that is taken from the EIGE [i.e., European Institute for Gender Equality], or what the legislation says. (Interview 2).

The ‘time of tension’ that the interviewee mentions refers to the escalating conflict within feminist movements and the policymaking arena in Catalonia and Spain regarding trans and/or non-binary people’s rights, especially concerning gender self-identification—a long-standing central demand by trans activists in Catalonia and beyond (Sánchez-Holgado et al., 2023; Willem et al., 2022). Along with international trends, the conflict is mainly taking place between trans-inclusionary feminists—mainly aligned with, but not limited to, postmodern and queer approaches, which the interviewee pejoratively describes as ‘radical movements’—; and other feminists who oppose gender self-identification and other trans rights—mostly certain radical feminists aligned with ‘difference’ approaches (Interviews 5, 8, 10, 12 & 13).⁹ This conflict, therefore, surfaces in the document. Interestingly, some interviewees stated that the debate is relatively recent and was absent when the document was produced. However, despite having gained momentum in recent years, the debate has existed in Spain for a long time (Mayor et al., 2020; Platero, 2011; Platero & Ortega-Arjonilla, 2015).

The preceding quotation illustrates how certain actors leverage international organizations (e.g., the EIGE) and existing legislation to legitimize binary approaches. The interviewee, for instance, justifies the majority perspective by pointing to its alignment with international and national mandates, perceived as authoritative voices (Hyatt, 2013). In this context, other authors (e.g., Tildesley et al., 2023) have noted that legislation in Spain and Catalonia predominantly conceptualizes gender in binary terms—i.e., as men and women—with a primary focus on women. This binary framing is also reflected in broader European policies (Booth & Bennett, 2002). Notably, these

⁹ This does not mean all ‘difference’ approaches and radical feminists oppose gender self-identification and other trans rights (e.g., Gimeno, 2022).

approaches largely omit perspectives that challenge binary understandings of gender or incorporate intersectional perspectives (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Lombardo et al., 2016). Although a detailed analysis of these texts is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to highlight their role in legitimizing specific approaches during the creation of the General Framework.

In contrast to actors aligned with majority perspectives, those closer to minority approaches not only were aware of their minority status, but also actively sought to advance their agenda by introducing specific language into the document. One actor illustrates this:

Then, in the wording... ‘well, gender is also this, also this, and intersectionality, etcetera.’ It was like saying: ‘well, [the document] can’t come out without any recognition, so at least conceptually it must be [written and give] enough flexibility so that those universities that want to go further can do so. (Interview 4).

This quote illustrates the strategic positioning of actors aligned with minority perspectives who, aware of their limited influence, sought to embed language that could enable broader and more inclusive interpretations of ‘gender perspective.’ In doing so, it highlights the agency of these actors in navigating power dynamics and negotiating space within a predominantly hegemonic discourse.

Considering all this, it becomes evident that the actors’ heterogeneous perspectives and approaches account for the discursive tensions and inconsistencies identified. On the one hand, a minority of actors understand ‘gender perspective’ non-binarily from a ‘transformation’ and intersectional approach. On the other hand, the majority align more with binary ‘difference’ perspectives, reflecting the homogeneity of their social positions and resulting in an oversight of the realities of non-binary and non-

white individuals. Additionally, some actors explicitly position themselves against non-binarism, considering the 'LGBTI world' as an external 'they', and labelling trans-inclusive feminisms pejoratively as 'radical movements', therefore framing them as external to the normative feminist discourse and reinforcing the boundary between 'acceptable' approaches and those considered deviant. These differing stances not only shape the construction of 'gender perspective' in the document, but also explain the inconsistencies and tensions. Therefore, understanding the document's production process and the power relations at play is crucial for moving beyond merely identifying tensions to explaining the somewhat ambiguous construction of 'gender perspective in university teaching.'

Final remarks: discourse, power, and other implications

This article shows how the meaning of 'gender perspective' is far from self-evident or straightforward. Rather, its discursive construction is formed by a complex interplay of contending, yet coexisting, views. Consequently, the introduction of such a 'gender perspective' in university teaching, much like other gender equality policies, can be understood as a cluster of contending approaches to addressing gender (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007; Lazar, 2007). In this regard, the framing of 'gender perspective in university teaching' cannot be understood independently from the approaches held by the actors involved in the creation of policy, especially those more successful in mobilizing discourse. That is, the actors' conceptualizations of gender equality significantly influence the core construction of 'gender perspective in university teaching.'

Two key concerns arise from this: first, the need to critically examine the power dynamics that shape the policymaking process (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009); and second, the

question of whose voices are represented and whose voices are silenced or omitted—i.e., who holds the authority to discursively construct the meaning of ‘gender perspective.’ This highlights how the biases inherent in the composition of the group of actors involved in policy production affect the relative inclusion or omission of certain perspectives, as the actors’ social positions can influence their viewpoints by shaping, for instance, which issues are prioritized. However, this relationship is not entirely deterministic, as demonstrated in this article, since actors sharing similar social positions may hold diverse approaches to gender equality.

As limitations, it is worth mentioning other elements that may also have influenced the construction of ‘gender perspective’ which this article has not addressed in depth. These include discourses in academic literature and in the supranational sphere, as well as the role and discourses of local and global feminist movements. Additionally, the evolution of the construction of ‘gender perspective’ in policy after 2018 is also beyond the scope of this article. Analyzing (dis)continuities in this regard will be the subject of future research.

This article seeks to contribute to the literature on critical policy sociology by underscoring the necessity of taking policy discourses in education seriously, as they legitimize certain approaches and realities while sidelining and neglecting others. Therefore, it is essential to critically scrutinize the explicit or implicit constructions of ‘policy problems’ and proposed ‘solutions’, and to pay attention to the ‘policy silences’ (Bacchi, 2009; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). These silences also set the boundaries of what is considered normal, or even thinkable, and what is outside the scope of normalcy (Allan, 2008; Hyatt, 2013). In fact, following Steven Lukes’ analysis of power, the ways in which power operates are not only related to overt conflict: keeping potential issues unquestioned to the degree that they are not even formulated in the actors’ minds

and remain unaddressed in political discussions is also a way in which power operates (Lukes, 2005; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). This exercise of power, which involves non-decision making and the control of the rules of the game, keeps certain issues out of policies either through social forces and institutional practices or individuals' decisions (Lukes, 2005, p. 24).

These ideas align with the conception of policies as 'representations of knowledge and power, discourses that construct a topic' (Maguire et al., 2011, p. 597), which not only reflect realities but shape and affect the social world (Ball, 2015). That is, the framing of 'gender perspective in university teaching' not only reflects certain approaches to gender equality (e.g., 'sameness', 'difference' or 'transformation'). Rather, policies, with their ambiguous and contradictory discursive constructions, highlight some aspects—e.g., gender identities, gendered problems, etc.—as relevant and rightful and relegate others as 'deviant' and less-legitimate (Hyatt, 2013). This is the case of approaching gender perspective beyond binary categories and/or connected to other social systems of domination (e.g., Curiel, 2019; Rodó-Zárate, 2021; Trujillo, 2022; Vergès, 2019), marginalized within the policy framework.

Lastly, a discursive analysis of policies is relevant to unpack and uncover 'the norms embedded in particular constructions, which reflect taken-for-granted beliefs and hegemonic assumptions' (Lombardo et al., 2016, p. 5; Bacchi, 2009, Loutzenheiser, 2015). But, beyond that, it plays a vital role in questioning and critically examining what is somewhat presented as a 'neutral' and 'depoliticized' issue, a sort of empty shell, reduced to an unproblematic buzzword (see Olufemi, 2020). The introduction of gender perspectives in university teaching runs the risk, like other gender equality measures, of becoming bureaucratized or technical procedures disconnected from any political contestation or conflict (Squires, 2005; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). Its

transformative potential might be limited if it does not involve a profound understanding and subversion of the gender regimes of power and oppression in relation to other social systems of domination (Filigrana, 2021, Forde, 2013, Vergès, 2019), as well as an intersectional questioning of what education and teaching mean (Martínez-Martín & Ramírez-Artiaga, 2017). This will also depend on the interplay between the actors who enact these policies—with their approaches, experiences, and priorities—and the characteristics of the institutions and contexts in which they are implemented (Tildesley et al., 2023). Analyzing the enactment and effects of these policies in practice is an open line for future research.

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