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Depoliticisation and Repoliticisation of Feminist Knowledge in a Nordic Knowledge Regime: The Case of Gender Budgeting in Finland

Abstract

Knowledge has a growing role in contemporary politics and policy-making. As a response to new forms of governance and evidence-based policy-making, feminist knowledge has become an important device of gender equality policy. This article analyses the role, form, and producers of feminist knowledge in contemporary policy-making. It focuses on the depoliticising as well as the repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production. It takes as its focus the recent gender budgeting initiative in Finland. The article shows that the role of feminist knowledge is *symbolic*; that the preferred form of feminist knowledge is *quantified knowledge*; and that the credible producers of feminist knowledge are *gender experts and economists*. All these elements of feminist knowledge production are characterised by a constant movement between depoliticisation and repoliticisation.

Keywords

Feminist knowledge; governance; evidence-based policy; gender budgeting; depoliticisation; repoliticisation

Introduction

Knowledge has a growing role in contemporary policy-making. Although knowledge in general and statistical knowledge, in particular, have always played a significant role in ruling states and societies, the interest in knowledge as a basis for policy-making has grown tremendously in the

2000s. This interest has led to a surge of approaches and methods seeking to provide knowledge or ‘evidence’ for policy-making (e.g., Triantafillou, 2017; Ylöstalo, 2019). In gender equality policy, the growing interest in knowledge as a basis for policy-making has resulted in the eager adoption of strategies for gender equality that are based on feminist knowledge. Feminist researchers and NGOs, for example, have produced policy-relevant expert knowledge and gender analyses of policy reforms in order to sway politicians and the general public with supposedly ‘objective’, ‘value-free’ knowledge (Elomäki et al., 2019; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2011). These strategies often require ‘gender expertise’. This expertise includes not only specialised knowledge about gender and gender equality, but also a mastery of specific techniques to promote gender equality, such as gender mainstreaming, gender-impact assessments, and gender budgeting (e.g., Bustelo et al., 2016; Hoard, 2015; Kunz & Prügl, 2019; Kunz et al., 2019).

In this article I take as my focus feminist knowledge – its role, form, and producers – in contemporary policy-making. I understand feminist knowledge broadly: it is plural, political, contested, and reflexive knowledge about gender as well as structural and systematic gender inequality, and it aims at being transformative (Bustelo et al., 2016; Cullen & Ferree, 2018). I focus on gender budgeting, a relatively new knowledge-based strategy for gender equality. I draw from a specific empirical case: namely, a recent initiative that aimed at designing a model for gender budgeting in Finland. A practical strategy for engendering macroeconomic policies, gender budgeting seeks to integrate gender analysis into economic policy, government spending, and revenue proposals. It is based on two important developments in the 1980s and 1990s: the efforts of feminist economists to overcome gender-blind economic theories and policies (e.g., Bakker, 1994), and the efforts of local and transnational feminist movements to engage in economic policy debates and to integrate gender equality perspectives in macroeconomic policies (O’Hagan & Klatzer, 2018). Both of these developments highlight the role of feminist knowledge and gender expertise in making feminist claims.

In analysing such feminist knowledge, my article contributes to ongoing discussions of depoliticisation. In the domain of political science, the discussion of depoliticisation has focused on how contemporary governing strategies contribute to closing down the political realm in various ways. Depoliticisation has been intertwined with the emergence of technocratic, post-democratic forms of governance (Fawcett et al., 2018; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018). Feminist academics have also sometimes used the term depoliticisation to describe, for example, the removal of feminist critique from the discourses of gender expertise (Kunz et al., 2019). The idea of depoliticisation has also played a key role in feminist academic discussions regarding governance and its implications for feminism (e.g., Cavaghan, 2017; Meier & Celis, 2011). Nevertheless, feminist academics have thus far contributed relatively little to the conceptual analysis of depoliticisation (see, however, Elomäki, 2017). Discussions of depoliticisation in political science, for their part, have sidelined feminist and gender perspectives.

I contribute to these discussions by analysing depoliticising as well as repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production. I ask, first, how feminist knowledge and knowledge producers are understood, and what kind of a role and form feminist knowledge is given in processes of gender budgeting in a Nordic knowledge regime. Second, I examine the depoliticising and repoliticising tendencies that affect feminist knowledge production in this context. Based on my analysis of the Finnish case, I argue that in contemporary policy-making and particularly in gender budgeting the role of feminist knowledge is *symbolic*; that the preferred form of feminist knowledge is *quantified knowledge*; and that the credible producers of feminist knowledge are *gender experts and economists*, irrespective of whether they are feminists or not. All these elements of feminist knowledge production are characterised by a constant movement between depoliticisation and repoliticisation. The concept of depoliticisation refers to the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making (Burnham, 2001: 127). Conversely, I use the concept of repoliticisation to refer both to the process of enabling choices, collective agency, and deliberation

around political decision-making (cf. Fawcett et al., 2018), and to the process of making visible the choices, values, and ideologies embedded in political decisions. Rather than casting depoliticisation and repoliticisation as antithetical or dichotomous tendencies, I will show that both are an integral part of feminist knowledge production.

Finland represents a ‘Nordic knowledge regime’, a distinctive Nordic model of knowledge-based governance. Finland, along with other Nordic countries, is internationally acknowledged as an exemplary ‘information society’, combining aspects of the social democratic welfare state with a knowledge-intensive form of capitalism (Christensen et al., 2017; Moisio, 2018). Knowledge has also gained a firm foothold in policy-making in Finland due to the strength of professional expertise in state bureaucracies and the presence of strong institutional mechanisms for examining societal problems in scientific terms (Christensen et al., 2017). I will show that while the Nordic knowledge regime provides favourable conditions for knowledge-based feminist claims, the impact of those claims on macroeconomic and other policies nevertheless remains marginal.

Gender budgeting as a knowledge-based feminist strategy

Gender budgeting initiatives first started out as a criticism of economic policy and budgetary processes and the ways in which they have reinforced gender inequalities. In particular, analyses of the gendered impacts of global economic crises have been influential in this regard. Feminist researchers have shown that women, particularly minority women, have borne the brunt of austerity policies around the globe in terms of loss of income and public services (e.g., Elson, 2014; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014; Pearson & Elson, 2015). Apart from feminists and gender equality proponents, gender budgeting has also attracted interest from powerful and influential organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (see, e.g., Downes et al., 2016; Stotsky, 2016).

Moving beyond critique, gender budgeting has subsequently developed into a set of practices that link public-sector budgeting with gender equality objectives (O'Hagan, 2017; O'Hagan & Klatzer, 2018; Pearson & Elson, 2015; Quinn, 2017). It takes as its focus budgets and budgetary processes, which are understood in the gender budgeting discourse as powerful political technologies through which political priorities are translated into numbers and vested with economic resources (Marx, 2018). A principal aim of gender budgeting is to integrate gender analysis into economic policy, government spending, and revenue proposals. Gender budgeting politicises the budget in two ways: first, by showing that the budget is not a technical exercise but a political tool and process, given that it is the principal expression of government priorities; and second, by showing the gendered consequences of specific decisions that are contained in the budget (O'Hagan, 2017).

In Finland, the concept of gender budgeting has been employed only recently, although certain gender budgeting practices have been implemented in the Finnish state administration since the early 2000s as part of the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Since then, gender budgeting has been enacted in regulatory gender-impact assessments as well as in mainstreaming a gendered perspective relative to the ministries' budgets and performance management. The implementation of these practices has, however, been rather weak, and a systematic gender budgeting approach has been missing (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2018). Gender budgeting finally took a step forward in the spring of 2015, when a group of feminist academics criticised the newly elected Finnish government and its government programme on the grounds that it had sidelined issues of gender equality. These feminist academics paid particular attention to the gendered effects of the government's austerity policies (Elomäki et al., 2019). In this respect, Finland followed the feminist movement in the UK as well as in other national contexts, where the gendered effects of austerity and the rolling back of public services and social security have sparked new forms of feminist critique (Elomäki et al., 2019; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017).

The feminist critique in Finland gave rise to a relatively wide public discussion about the gender impacts of macroeconomic policies (Elomäki et al., 2019). Although this public discussion had hardly any effect on government policies, nonetheless, in its Action Plan for Gender Equality, the previous government (2015-2019) declared that to reach gender equality, a gender-impact assessment of the state budget would be developed further (MSAH, 2017, p. 19). As a result, the state-funded research and development project *Gender Equality in the Government Budget* (hereafter, the GB project) was carried out in 2017-2018. This project, funded by the government, was given three tasks by the funder: (1) to identify best practices in gender-impact assessments of budgets in other countries; (2) to develop methods to assess the gender impacts of the budget and to assess the gender impacts of the sitting government's policies; and (3) to make recommendations concerning the integration of gender-impact assessments and other gender budgeting tools and practices into the budgetary process in the Finnish state administration. I have been personally involved in this process, because I designed and led the abovementioned project with Anna Elomäki. Along with Elomäki and me, who are gender equality scholars, the research group consisted of economists, statisticians, and social scientists who specialise in quantitative research on social policies.

My personal engagement with this process has given me extensive access to various types of relevant data, such as policy documents and interviews. The present analysis draws on these documents and materials related to the GB project, using as data research reports and policy documents (e.g., the government programme and the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality). My analysis also draws on semi-structured interviews (N=24), conducted in 2017-2018, with key policy actors involved with gender budgeting in Finland. The interviewees were involved with budgetary processes at the Ministry of Finance and the Prime Minister's Office, as well as at three sectoral ministries. I also interviewed state officials working with gender equality policy, policy-impact assessments, and performance management. In addition, some Members of the

Finnish Parliament were also interviewed. Other data used for the analysis include my own participant observations and fieldnotes, as well as news reports about the project.

My personal involvement with the project has also shaped my methodological approach. In conducting the analysis, I have moved back and forth between my own experiences, their broader social context, and key concepts from feminist theory in order to involve ‘the self’ in the analysis (see Etorre, 2017). I have thus adopted a self-critical and reflexive feminist approach in which I analyse, too, my own role as a ‘gender expert’ (see Ferguson, 2015; Jones et al., 2018). Moreover, I have synthesised elements of textual analysis and discourse analysis in order to pay attention to the construction of feminist knowledge in a particular socio-political context. In focusing specifically on the Nordic knowledge regime, I have treated it as a context that both enables and constrains feminist knowledge production.

Depoliticisation and repoliticisation of feminist knowledge in the context of governance

While depoliticisation is a contested concept, there seems to be a consensus among scholars that it includes a set of processes (including tactics, strategies, and tools) that displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue (Fawcett et al., 2018). Here it is important to stress that, in this definition, depoliticisation is not associated with the *removal* but rather the *denial* of politics (Burnham, 2001; Flinders & Wood, 2014). For example, in policy-making there is always contestation about which types of knowledge and methodologies are considered authoritative (Kunz et al., 2019; Triantafillou, 2015). If this contestation is circumvented and certain forms of knowledge are granted more authority than others, the knowledge-policy relations are depoliticised. This process of depoliticisation, however, does not erase the reality that the establishment of ‘evidence hierarchies’ in policy-making remains a deeply political issue.

In this article, I focus on depoliticisation and governance in a Nordic context. I have adopted a state-centric approach that examines the withdrawal of politicians from the direct control of a vast

range of governmental functions and, concomitantly, the rise of technocratic forms of governance (Burnham, 2001; Wood and Flinders, 2014). In feminist research, these changes, involving greater reliance on third parties in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policy, have sparked the emergence of new analytical concepts such as ‘market feminism’, ‘governance feminism’, and ‘crisis governance feminism’ (Griffin, 2015; Halley et al., 2018; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2011). All these concepts illustrate in their own distinct ways how feminism itself has changed through its engagement with governance structures. At the core is the development of a particular kind of feminist knowledge: namely, policy-relevant, quantified, economised, governance-friendly expert knowledge (Elomäki et al., 2019; Prügl, 2011).

Although feminist research has not yet engaged intensively with theoretical debates about depoliticisation, there is an extensive body of research regarding the effects of new forms of governance on feminism and gender equality policy. These effects include, for example, the granting of primacy to the feminist claims that are complicit with a market agenda (Kantola & Squires, 2012); the reinforcement of the ‘economic case’ for gender equality through an emphasis on its macroeconomic benefits (Elomäki, 2015; Roberts, 2015); the professionalisation of feminist knowledge in governmental institutions (Kantola & Squires, 2012; Kunz et al., 2019); and the implementation of tactics and tools (such as gender mainstreaming) that fit in with the prevalent logic of governance (Cavaghan, 2017; Griffin, 2015; Prügl, 2011; Rubery, 2005). This prior research has highlighted the ambivalent nature of feminist knowledge: On the one hand, it is a means for transformative feminist politics. On the other hand, it has in many cases been bent in ways that shift the focus from gendered power relations to the tactics and tools needed to integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas.

The discussion of depoliticisation tends to revolve around its negative impact, such as its de-democratising effects as well as its tendency to fuel anti-politics (Fawcett et al., 2018). In this article, however, rather than assuming a unidirectional change toward depoliticised policy-making, I

highlight both depoliticising and repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production.

Feminist accounts of feminist knowledge production and diffusion are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the depoliticisation of feminist knowledge. In line with this approach, the literature on feminist knowledge tends to be structured by a dichotomous understanding of feminist knowledge as either co-opted or resistant (Eschle & Maiguascha, 2018). In the following sections, by contrast, I aim to move beyond this dichotomy by identifying both depoliticising and repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production in gender budgeting. Rather than splitting feminist knowledge into ‘good’ knowledge, which has resisted or been purified of the influences of neoliberal governance, and ‘bad’ knowledge, whose governance-friendly orientation means that it has been co-opted (see Eschle & Maiguascha, 2018), I will show that the Finnish case of gender budgeting is characterised by both resistant and assimilationist tendencies. I will do so by focusing on the tensions around feminist knowledge production, exploring the political dynamics of such tensions as well as their political implications.

The symbolic role of feminist knowledge in policy-making

In this section, I examine the role of feminist knowledge in policy-making in the Finnish context. Academic feminists’ critique of government policies was not the only reason why gender budgeting gained ground in Finland. Gender budgeting also fit well with the recent framing of policy-making as ‘evidence-based’ (e.g., Triantafillou, 2017). In Finland, policy-making since the 1990s has become increasingly characterised by governing through knowledge, and this tendency has only intensified in the 2010s (Ylöstalo, 2019). Civil servants tend to be well-educated, and the state has strong institutional mechanisms for examining societal problems and inventing policy solutions via expert knowledge. Lately, there has been a tendency to move this emphasis on expertise further away from political control via the transfer of administrative functions to independent agencies. This shift has created a more autonomous role for professional knowledge, because expertise is increasingly located at arm’s length from politicians (Christiansen et al., 2017). In addition, experts

(such as management gurus, researchers, and consultants) have been enlisted in policy-making initiatives to an extent that has given rise to questions about a ‘shadow government’ and a ‘consultocracy’ (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018).

Feminists in Finland as well as internationally have been quick to exploit this emphasis on evidence-based policy-making (hereafter, EBP). Feminist actors have worked to support their claims about the need for gender equality with supposedly ‘value-free’ and ‘objective’ knowledge (Kantola and Squires, 2012). Gender budgeting can be seen as an extension of this movement. Although its aim is political to the core — that is, to transform macroeconomics by making gender visible in economic and other policy domains (Himmelweit, 2002) — gender budgeting has also tended to use the technocratic and depoliticised language and tools of public governance (Marx, 2018).

Analysis of the role of feminist knowledge in gender budgeting initiatives in Finland reveals depoliticising as well as repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production, whose contributions to such policy-making efforts must be situated in the larger context of EBP. I illustrate these tendencies by quoting Annika Saarikko, the former Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, from her speech at the GB project report’s publication seminar:

Sometimes one [a politician] does not even want to know what kind of an impact policies have. Or, precisely because one can predict even without impact assessments or research that there are going to be negative impacts on certain groups of people, it is convenient to provide a moderate impact assessment, or omit to do it altogether. [...] Very often when a politician creates a solution that, for example, weakens the financial situation of a certain segment of the population, they know exactly what they are doing. It is a different matter, however, when they are driven by legitimate motives. If we look at the economic situation now, which is significantly better [than at the beginning of the government term], we can estimate that in the long run the

decisions that were initially financially onerous were absolutely necessary [...] but no one can deny their negative impact on certain groups of people.

Saarikko's remarks illustrate the movement between depoliticisation and repoliticisation with respect to the use of expert knowledge in policy-making. On the one hand, knowledge can be deeply political. If politicians are aware of policy impacts, policies no longer appear as neutral, rational solutions to emergent policy problems; rather, it becomes clear that the politicians have chosen to target certain groups of people with those policies, instead of other groups. On the other hand, the claimed necessity of those policy solutions can be cited as a rationale for backgrounding or overruling their gender and other impacts, in which case knowledge-policy relations are depoliticised. This suggests that in a Nordic knowledge regime, where knowledge is given high value in policy-making and in society more generally, politicians are constantly balancing between the demands of efficient policy-making and the demands of EBP (see Ylöstalo, 2019). This balancing act requires that expert knowledge play a specific role, in which its value does not derive from its ability to represent the world but rather from its ability to support policy-making.

The tendency by the politicians to ignore 'inconvenient' knowledge in policy-making was shared by many of the state officials who were interviewed. In one interview, an official who prepares legislation in a ministry said that 'in a way, evidence is used in policy-making less than ever'. By this he did not mean that there is a lack of evidence, but that 'political will' has become more important than the evidence per se, 'a fast, cyclical, impulse-like will'. He also stated that legislative processes are often so fast that impact assessments have to be written into the government proposals after those proposals have already been put forward. Regardless of their outcome, the decisions have already been made, and the assessments make no difference. He continued:

In this process, nobody is a victim but everyone understands that it is all theatre. Are we, as a society, at a point where this whole procedure has nothing but a symbolic

value? We laugh about ‘alternative facts’ and Trump, but don’t we know, at least subconsciously, that we are actually in the same situation? Maybe it helps with the treatment of this trauma that we play-act collectively.

This official’s comments, like Saarikko’s, reveal yet another way knowledge plays a role in policy-making: namely, through the emphasis placed on the *recognition* of a policy impact. The strategy of gender budgeting, or gender mainstreaming, is grounded partly on the project of raising gender awareness by, for example, assessing the gender impacts of policies and budgets. Previous research on gender mainstreaming has often identified weak or ineffective implementation of gender-mainstreaming initiatives as its core problem (e.g., Cavaghan, 2017; Meier & Celis, 2011; Rubery, 2005; Ylöstalo, 2016). I suggest a further problem that is connected with the role of knowledge: EBP acts as a smokescreen to what remains political policy-making, because of which the (gender) impacts are recognised but given merely symbolic value.

This diagnosis may seem to suggest that feminist knowledge plays a different role than the one identified in previous analyses of feminist knowledge production and its diffusion across different social and political arenas. These analyses have highlighted the many ways in which feminist knowledge is systematically contested, marginalised, and ignored (e.g., Cavaghan, 2017; Ferguson, 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Meier & Celis, 2011). But in the Nordic knowledge regime, where EBP is seen as an important element of good and efficient governance (Ylöstalo, 2019), feminist knowledge is viewed as valuable. This can be seen, for example, in the wide media coverage that followed the publication of the GB project report: virtually every major newspaper in Finland reported that ‘Economic policy treats women and men differently in Finland’ (see, e.g., Malin, 2018). The results of our research were not contested; rather, they were repeated as they were. However, this recognition of feminist knowledge does not necessarily lead to more gender equal policies or budgets.

Giving knowledge a symbolic role in policy-making has both repoliticising and depoliticising effects. On the one hand, feminist knowledge acquires a legitimate place in policy-making, and it can make visible, for example, gendered policy impacts. On the other hand, casting policy-making initiatives as evidence-based can also legitimise the content of certain policies. This can be seen in a following excerpt from another interview:

If you are a politician, the most horrifying thing is that you have made a proposal, and at the point when it has reached the parliament, a docent on duty says, out of the blue, ‘Hey, haven’t you thought about the gender impacts at all?’ At that point, the politician is in a tough situation. The politician would surely hope that they could go to the parliament and answer, ‘Yes, here they [the gender impact assessments] are.’
(State official)

What is striking about this comment is that it acknowledges, at least implicitly, that the results of gender-impact assessments are insignificant. Knowledge is surely important, even vital, when it comes to legitimating politics and policy-making; however, it mainly has a representative value. Appeals to expert knowledge are used to suggest that the policy proposal has been diligently prepared and that it is based on knowledge and reason instead of pure political will. This chain of implications rests, in turn, on the assumption that politics is legitimate as long as its impacts have been assessed (see also Elomäki & Kantola, 2017). The analysis sketched here, however, illustrates that even if feminist knowledge is welcomed in the domain of policy-making, its transformative potential remains marginal. In EBP, feminist knowledge becomes a footnote or a variable in impact assessment, eventually overruled by, for example, ‘economic necessities’ (Elomäki et al., 2019).

Quantification of gender equality

In this section, I examine the form(s) of feminist knowledge in play in gender budgeting initiatives in Finland. Feminist knowledge is plural, political, contested and reflexive knowledge. In a given

time and place, certain ways of knowing are privileged over others (Bustelo et al., 2016). In the context of gender budgeting, feminist knowledge has been bent to fit with the ‘evidence hierarchies’ within the EBP movement (see Triantafillou, 2015). Contemporary EBP tends to favour the methods of the natural and psychological sciences as well as economics (Jones & Whitehead, 2018). Relatedly, certain forms of knowledge are granted more authority than others. In policy-making, one of the dominant forms of knowledge is quantitative in nature, i.e., knowledge involving numbers (Davies, 2018; Marx, 2018).

Although there are many ways of doing gender budgeting and assessing gender impacts, quantified gender-impact analyses have arguably become the main tool for gender budgeting (Marx, 2018). The Finnish model of gender budgeting developed in the GB project also relies on quantification of gender inequalities. This is partly because the funder, the government, was mainly interested in developing methods for assessing the gender impact of the budget. The funder gave very specific parameters for the project: the project was to assess direct and indirect gender impacts of changes to policies concerning taxation, social benefits, and public services, for example (Government’s Analysis, Assessment, and Research Activities, 2017). This focus on quantified inequalities, such as distributional inequalities, highlights the value given to numbers as a form of knowledge.

Although numbers seem to carry an aura of dispassionate observation, the very act of social quantification is in itself political, and calculative practices are crucial techniques for governance (Merry, 2016; Rose, 1991). Numbers do not merely describe the world; they also intervene in social life by creating knowable and manageable subjects and realities. Gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming, for example, have been criticised for translating problems of gender equality into calculable, economised objects, and thereby giving primacy to issues that fit easily with this numerical logic, such as women’s employment rates and gender discrimination taking the form of unequal pay. This sort of quantitative translation has resulted in adopting gender equality policies that are aligned with employment priorities (Elomäki, 2015).

That said, however, quantification is also a powerful way of making feminist critique visible. The UK Women's Budget Group, for example, has been able to demonstrate with their econometric calculations that austerity policies have hit women, especially minority women, the hardest (e.g., Pearson & Elson, 2015). The same point applies to gender budgeting in Finland: with numbers we were able to show that the government's economic policy has increased distributional inequality between women and men in Finland. In this manner, we were also able to politicise budgetary processes and economic policy, which in Finland have been presented as 'ideas that cannot be challenged' (Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2018, p. 15). As previously indicated, our project's results were also reported widely in the Finnish media, and often it was the numbers that became the news, instead of gender budgeting as such. For example, *Helsingin Sanomat* titled its article on the project 'Man benefited 144 euros more than woman from Sipilä government policy' (Nalbantoglu, 2018). Through numbers, government policies – and particularly austerity policies – were repoliticised from a feminist perspective. More generally, quantification is indeed seductive because when inequality is described in numbers, the resulting translation carries an implicit promise of concrete information, a solid basis for easy comparison between different policy proposals. Moreover, quantification gives scientific authority to political claims — despite the extensive interpretative work that goes into the construction of numbers (Merry, 2016). Paradoxically, the political efficacy of numbers results from their alleged neutrality—that is, from the depoliticisation of quantified knowledge itself (Rose, 1991).

In order to be policy-relevant, it is not enough that the knowledge is presented in the form of numbers; what is more, the numbers should also be simple enough that any MP or regular citizen can understand what they represent. During our work on the gender budgeting project, this demand was repeatedly made by virtually everyone who was involved with the project. For example, I gave a statement about gender budgeting to the Employment and Equality Committee of the Finnish Parliament. There, an MP asked me if we could develop gender budgeting techniques further, so

that in the end we would have one number, ‘like GDP [gross domestic product]’, that would show whether the budget has increased or decreased economic inequality between women and men (Fieldnotes, 27 September, 2018). Whereas politicians demanded that the numbers be easy to understand, state officials demanded that they be easy to produce. A state official said as much in one of the interviews:

I think that if you want to promote these kinds of things, the starting point should be quite modest, given the resources. If you can sell the idea to the people [in the ministries] who prepare the policy proposals that this is not a very complex issue, you could just do the simple descriptive stuff to indicate what your subject area looks like from a gender perspective, and you would not have to go into this complicated discussion at all, which you and I might be thinking about.

This remark reveals a further problem involving not only gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming but also EBP: The form of knowledge that EBP is based on tends to influence and narrow down the scope of political approaches and goals. By implication, EBP must be able to translate its goals into objective, quantifiable measures, or benchmarks. However, most political goals and visions — such as gender equality — are often quite complex. When such goals are translated into objective and quantifiable measures, they are likely to take on a much narrower and possibly even different meaning than intended (Kantola & Squires, 2012; Triantafyllou, 2015). Accordingly, although quantification can help politicise budgetary processes and economic policy, it involves a risk of reducing gender equality to calculations about very limited policy issues.

Gender experts and economists: credible feminist knowledge producers

In this section, I examine feminist knowledge producers in the Finnish gender budgeting initiative. From a feminist perspective, a remarkable feature of governance as well as EBP is the tendency to professionalise feminist knowledge and to institute the requirement of using ‘gender experts’ and

‘gender expertise’ (Hoard, 2015; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Kunz et al., 2019; Olivius & Rönnblom, 2019). Previous research has identified depoliticising tendencies in this development. Gender experts and gender expertise have, for example, been accused of technicalising the feminist agenda and reducing the struggle for gender equality to checklists, gender-training toolkits, or the ‘gender washing’ of policy documents (e.g., Kantola & Squires, 2012; Kunz & Prügl, 2019).

In Finland, one of the building blocks of gender expertise has been the long-standing alliance between women’s NGOs, feminist politicians and femocrats (feminists bureaucrats within the state government), and feminist researchers and experts (see Holli, 2009). Each one of these actors has brought particular kinds of expertise and skill to gender equality policy. Thus, NGOs have brought knowledge about actual women’s experiences; femocrats and feminist politicians have brought an understanding of how the political and policy-making systems work; and researchers and experts have brought gender analyses and ‘technical knowledge’ about gender equality policy (Elomäki et al., 2020). These alliances indicate a strong connection between feminist knowledge, feminist knowledge producers, and the feminist movement in Finland.

The focus on distributional inequalities in the Finnish model of gender budgeting seems to be causing a rupture in these connections. In Finland, gender budgeting is strongly linked not only to gender equality policy but also to EBP and policy-impact assessments. Since the 2010s, the interest in policy-impact assessments, especially, has grown tremendously. When drafting laws, state officials are supposed to assess, for example, distributional and employment impacts as well as impacts on gender, children, pensioners, and so on. Simultaneously, the quality standards of impact assessments have become stricter. One example of this tightening of standards is the Finnish Council of Regulatory Impact Analysis, which was established in 2015 with the aim of improving the quality of bill drafting and, in particular, the impact assessment of government proposals.

This development, as well as the power of numbers, has led to the need for a new kind of expertise—that is, mastery of key impact-assessment methods, such as microsimulation. Thus, for

the gender-impact assessment of the budget that was carried out in the framework of the GB project, microsimulation with the 'SISU' model was used. This model is a calculation tool intended for the planning, monitoring, and assessing of personal taxation and social security legislation. But whereas microsimulation requires expertise in economics and statistics, gender budgeting also requires gender expertise of some sort. In Finland, these forms of expertise are generally detached. As a state official explained in one of the interviews:

The challenge is to bring together gender equality knowledge and knowledge about how to run microsimulations. [...] We in the [gender equality office] have absolutely no resources with which to assess the economic impacts of a government proposal.

We have no tools.

The lack of tools is a matter of concern not only for state administrators, but also for academic researchers: unlike in the UK, for example, there is in Finland no tradition of feminist economics in gender studies or in the discipline of economics. In the GB project, due to the lack of team members who combined gender and economics expertise, we had to build new strategic partnerships. We paired up with femocrats and non-feminist economists and statisticians while women's NGOs were more or less left on the sidelines. In this context, non-feminist economists and statisticians became 'gender experts'.

This situation points to a contested issue in feminist literature on gender expertise: the relationship between gender expertise and feminism as a political movement. Underlying much of the earlier research on gender mainstreaming was the assumption that gender expertise is more or less feminist, in the sense that it seeks to advance gender equality (e.g. Rubery, 2005; Kantola & Squires, 2012). In the gender budgeting project in Finland, however, the economists and statisticians were committed to knowledge, but not necessarily to feminism. They were also unfamiliar with feminist epistemologies, which sometimes led to debates between us and the economists about, for example, whether one can claim that women and men have different 'innate

preferences'. In these debates our gender expertise as feminist scholars was confronted with mainstream economic research, noteworthy for its gender blindness.

Yet another effect of the inclusion of non-feminist economists and statisticians into feminist knowledge production is that feminist knowledge becomes produced exclusively by researchers and other 'method-experts'. In the GB project, we not only included economists and statisticians in the project team, but also organised a 'method workshop' that brought together method experts from different disciplines. In Finland, this kind of 'scientisation' of gender knowledge has had the effect of further pushing away some of the traditional feminist actors, particularly the feminist NGOs, from the processes of feminist knowledge production, at least with respect to gender budgeting initiatives.

The 'technical complexity' and multidisciplinary approach embedded in gender budgeting projects has nevertheless helped to legitimise gender budgeting in Finland. In the GB project, expert authority regarding gender budgeting derived in part from the project team's association with more than one academic discipline. Such multidisciplinaryity was, indeed, a strategy that we used deliberately in order to legitimise gender budgeting. This strategy is visible, for example, in the project report, where we wrote:

Questions about the gender impacts of economic policy, as well as their assessment, are complex and require a multidisciplinary approach. [...] In Finland, dialogue between gender equality researchers and economists has been limited up to this point. By strengthening this dialogue, the [GB] project has been a path-breaking initiative in Finland. (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2018, p. 8)

As a result of 'evidence hierarchies' in the EBP movement (Triantafyllou, 2015), economics and statistics have tended to carry, in the ecology of knowledge production, more weight than feminist and gender studies. Gender studies scholars have struggled to gain authority in the technocratic

contexts of governance, and have therefore sought out authority by drawing on or pairing with other academic fields (Elomäki et al., 2019; Kunz et al., 2019). In Finland, this strategy seems to have worked, in the sense that our gender budgeting analyses, which were provided by a multidisciplinary group of experts, gained nationwide attention in the news media. Likewise, politicians as well as key economic actors, such as the Ministry of Finance, the Finance Committee of the Finnish Parliament, and the National Audit Office of Finland, invited Anna Elomäki and me to speak about gender budgeting. While this attention has helped us to politicise budgets and budgetary processes by ‘gendering’ them, it also raises questions about whether feminist knowledge in contexts of gender budgeting is sometimes detached from feminism as political movement. The risk posed by this detachment or uncoupling is a fading away of the transformative dimension of feminist knowledge. That risk affects not only non-feminist gender experts, but also feminist researchers themselves. For example, in the GB project, we gender equality scholars easily adopted the role of objective and rational knowledge providers. What the transformative potential of such knowledge is, however, remains to be seen.

Conclusions

In this article, I have examined the role, form, and producers of feminist knowledge in policy-making in a Nordic knowledge regime in the context of technocratic governance, evidence-based policy, and, in this case, austerity. Previous feminist research on feminist knowledge vis-à-vis policy-making in such contexts has been fairly pessimistic about the transformative potential of feminist knowledge. I have joined this discussion by showing how, in many cases, feminist knowledge is ignored or marginalised, or mutated, simplified, and economised for the purposes of governance. However, in line with recent feminist research on gender expertise, my analysis shifts the focus from the struggles of individual feminists to political practices in their social context (see Kunz et al., 2019). This shift of focus has allowed me to bring to light the ambivalences of feminist knowledge production in the context of governance and EBP. By analysing a gender budgeting

initiative in Finland I have shown that the role of feminist knowledge is *symbolic*; that the preferred form of feminist knowledge is *quantified knowledge*; and that the credible producers of feminist knowledge are *gender experts and economists*. All these elements of feminist knowledge production are characterised, in turn, by a constant movement between depoliticisation and repoliticisation. Through a detailed, ‘slow-motion’ analysis of this movement, I have aimed to reframe dichotomous understandings of depoliticisation and repoliticisation by showing that both of these tendencies are an integral part of making knowledge-based feminist claims.

In gender budgeting, the depoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production are many. The Finnish case suggests that gender budgeting often relies on quantified, governance-friendly, economised knowledge that tends to shrink feminist struggles to policy-impact assessments and very limited perspectives on economic equality. Feminist knowledge producers have sought backup from non-feminist researchers and disciplines, which entails the risk of detaching feminist knowledge from feminism viewed as a transformative political movement. Nevertheless, there are also repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production in gender budgeting. Gender budgeting has politicised budgets and budgetary processes as well as economic and fiscal policies by exposing their gendered impacts and by demanding alternatives to austerity policies, among other policies with a disproportionately negative impact on women. In the context of evidence-based policy and technocratic forms of governance, feminist knowledge has at least given a glimpse of the deeply politicised nature of ‘evidence hierarchies’ by questioning the alleged gender neutrality of the knowledge that budgets and budgetary processes rest on and are legitimised by. Gender budgeting has been less successful in deconstructing other knowledge-policy power structures within the EBP movement, such as the power of numbers.

The strengthening of EBP throughout the 2000s implies that feminist knowledge continues to be at the forefront of feminist intellectual and political struggles. By analysing the depoliticising and repoliticising tendencies in feminist knowledge production in the context of gender budgeting, I

have shown that using feminist knowledge as a strategy for reducing structural and systematic gender inequalities is like tightrope walking: making any feminist knowledge claim seems to involve a risk of emptying feminist knowledge of its transformative potential. Rather than defining ‘good feminist knowledge’, or articulating guidelines for producing such knowledge, my aim is to highlight the importance of engaging with ongoing discussions about contemporary knowledge-policy relations. These relations are not fixed, but constantly negotiated in policy processes, including those that play out in gender budgeting. Taking part in these negotiations as feminist scholars is one way of keeping the intellectual and political projects of feminism alive.

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