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Shifting boundaries, dismantling brick walls: Feminist knowledge in the struggles to transform economic thinking and policy

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Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing debates on the politics of feminist knowledge transfer by considering how feminist professionals advocate transformative economic thinking and policies. I draw on interviews with an under-researched group—feminist professionals with specialized knowledge about the economy—to argue that feminist economic experts' transformative politics is shaped by highly contextual efforts to lend credibility to feminist alternatives to conventional economic knowledge and policy. Combining feminist scholarship on scientific boundary-work with theorizing on resistance to feminist institutional transformation, the article analyzes the practices that feminist experts use to reframe their knowledge claims to get their messages through to decision-makers. I suggest that although feminist boundary-work is likely to come up against 'brick walls' of institutional resistance, it can dismantle such walls by gradually shifting the boundaries of legitimate economic knowledge and policies.

KEYWORDS
boundary-work, economic policy, emotional labor, feminist knowledge, gender expertise, transformative politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, feminist analyses have significantly contributed to our understanding of the economy and economic policies. Feminist economists have challenged the gendered silences and biases in their discipline, for example, by illustrating how conventional macroeconomic approaches disregard the role of care and reproductive work in sustaining the economy (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Folbre & Nelson, 2000; Nelson, 1995). Furthermore, their analyses of financial governance have shown how reliance on gender-blind metrics and models leads to economic policies that are biased against women, racialized people and other marginalized groups (Himmelweit, 2002; Pearson & Elson, 2015; Young et al., 2011). Feminist scholarship has also demanded a paradigm shift in economic thinking and policy by showing that the pursuit of efficiency and economic-growth maximization over life-sustaining processes and well-being have detrimental consequences for both people and the planet (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Fraser, 2017; Power, 2004; Rai et al., 2014). However, despite the contributions of feminist economic analysts, policymakers tend to ignore their insights in favor of conventional economics perspectives (see Pearson & Elson, 2015; Ylöstalo, 2020). Therefore, it is important to analyze the possibilities and constraints of feminist knowledge practices in transforming economic thinking and policies.

In this article, I focus on how feminist knowledge about the economy can be used to promote alternatives to conventional forms of economic thinking and policy. Following previous literature, I understand feminist knowledge as plural, political, and contested as well as committed to approaching gender inequality in structural and systematic terms and eradicating intersectionally oppressive structures (Cullen et al., 2019, p. 766; Ylöstalo, 2020). Empirically, the article draws on interviews conducted internationally with an under-researched group: feminist professionals with expertise in the economy and economic policy. More specifically, the participants were a diverse group of scholars and policy experts who all used knowledge-based practices and technical expertise to advocate transformative feminist change. The participants had worked on many issues, including the following: challenging biases within the discipline of economics, providing critical analyses of governments' economic policies, and using feminist economic analysis to formulate policy programs, recommendations and tools, such as gender budgeting. In their economic policy work, they collaborated with different governmental levels, international organizations and activists to promote more gender-equal, socially just and environmentally sustainable societies.

To explore these experts' knowledge transfer practices, I address the following questions: What practices of knowledge diffusion do feminist experts engage in to establish the legitimacy of transformative economic thinking and policies in different institutional contexts? How do feminist experts seek to overcome institutional obstacles to their demands? By focusing on knowledge-based practices for advocating feminist transformation, this article follows previous scholarship on the practices of feminist knowledge transfer in contemporary political culture and on the tensions between technical knowledge and transformative feminist change (e.g., Bustelo et al., 2016; Cavaghan, 2017; Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2024; Elomäki et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Prügl, 2013; Ylöstalo, 2020). My research provides a new angle to these discussions: I theorize the participants' knowledge transfer practices as a form of boundary-work, that is, as efforts to establish the credibility of scientific and authoritative knowledge (Gieryn, 1983). In particular, I draw on feminist discussions of boundary-work (Pereira, 2017, 2019; Vuolanto & Kolehmainen, 2021), combining them with Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017, 2021) work on how unequal institutional and organizational structures limit feminist demands for transformation.

The contributions of this article are threefold. First, I offer insights into how feminists reframe their boundary-work claims to increase their chances of entering the broader policy discourse. For the participants, this involved not only carefully evaluating the usefulness of feminist arguments and ideas in relation to particular audiences and contexts but also complex balancing acts through which the participants sought to avoid diluting the transformative potential of feminist knowledge. Second, I demonstrate that despite feminist experts' potentially transformative practices, feminist knowledge claims still face many institutional obstacles and risk becoming 'non-performative' (see Ahmed, 2012), that is, unable to achieve their objectives. Third, I highlight that although multiple shifts in economic knowledge and policy must occur before the feminist experts' transformative demands can be fully

effective, feminist boundary-work can be seen as a continuous long-term epistemic and political struggle to bring about more equitable futures.

The article is structured as follows: The next section situates the article in relation to previous literature and explains its theoretical lenses. Then, I discuss my data and methodological choices. The analysis is presented in two sections. The first section examines the contextual boundary-work claims that the participants used to shift the boundaries of economic knowledge and policy. In addition, it situates the participants' knowledge transfer practices in relation to broader boundary struggles over legitimate economic knowledge and policy issues. The second section considers the institutional 'brick walls' against which these practices come up as well as efforts to dismantle such resistances. To conclude, I elaborate on what my findings tell us about the transformative possibilities of feminist knowledge transfer.

1.1 | Theorizing the politics and practices of feminist knowledge transfer: Boundary-work and brick walls

This article follows existing scholarship on the critical–political potential and constraints of feminist knowledge transfer in the contemporary political climate. Previous research has examined how, in a technocratic and economized context, feminist politics have become integrated into corporate and marketized logics. For example, gender equality arguments have often been subordinated to those emphasizing economic growth (Kantola & Squires, 2012; Roberts & Soederberg, 2012), which has led some scholars to suggest that feminism has become a watered-down, co-opted and 'strange shadowy version of itself' (Fraser, 2013, p. 224). Moreover, these tensions have been considered by a growing body of empirical inquiries into the practices of feminist knowledge transfer, which suggests a less straightforward interpretation of economized feminism and challenges 'the supposed duality between "pure" and co-opted feminist knowledge' (Cullen et al., 2019 p. 767). These studies have focused on how feminist experts negotiate the tensions between feminist politics and the economic and technocratic knowledge favored in different institutional settings. Their findings point to complex unresolved tensions between the technical and neutral frameworks of 'gender knowledge' and the transformative goals of the feminist movement and politics. Taking distance from the somewhat totalizing interpretations of 'co-optation', these studies emphasize the ambivalent dynamics by which feminist knowledge can be simultaneously depoliticized and repoliticized (e.g., Bustelo et al., 2016; Elomäki et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2014, 2018; Ylöstalo, 2020).

In this article, I build on this scholarship and its focus on how the tensions between transformative goals and technical tools 'can be overcome, and what kinds of strategies might be developed for doing so' (Ferguson, 2018, p. 298). As I will show, the kind of feminist economic expertise examined in this article epitomizes these tensions. In its goal to promote more gender equal, socially just and environmentally sustainable economies, this expertise advocates transformative policies and politics geared toward dismantling oppressive structures. Simultaneously, by relying on specialized knowledge and tools such as economic modeling and gender impact assessments, it can appear as a 'technocratic' means of impacting governments and other institutions of financial governance. These institutions often continue to be characterized by intersectionally unequal power hierarchies and male domination, despite the significant gains by feminist and other movements. By focusing on the institutional obstacles and resistance encountered by feminist experts and their knowledge-based demands, this article contributes to long-standing discussions on gendered institutions and organizations (Acker, 1992), as well as more recent debates on the role of formal and informal institutions in gender equitable change (Waylen, 2014). To shed new light on the dilemmas that feminist experts face when appealing to decision-makers in different institutions, I analyze the participants' knowledge practices and institutional resistances to these practices using the theoretical lenses of 'boundary-work' and 'brick walls'.

Rooted in the sociology of knowledge and science and technology studies, the concept of boundary-work refers to the efforts by which the legitimacy and authority of scientific knowledge is established (Gieryn, 1983).

Discussions of boundary-work rely on the idea that the construction of knowledge and 'evidence' is not only a scientific but also a thoroughly social process. However, until recently, theorizations of boundary-work have not sufficiently considered how struggles over credibility are related to gendered, racialized and other intersecting structures of power in institutions of knowledge. To address this lack of engagement, feminist scholars (Pereira, 2017, 2019; Vuolanto & Kolehmainen, 2021) have started to combine insights from analyses of boundary-work with feminist, postcolonial, and antiracist scholarship. They have demonstrated how the past and present structures of inequality shape the distribution of authority and work to marginalize feminist knowledge claims, as gendered forms of boundary-work contribute to the idea of science as a masculine domain. In this article, I build on these theorizations, particularly on Maria do Mar Pereira's (2012, 2017, 2019) work on the efforts to establish the credibility of feminist knowledge in institutions of knowledge production. Pereira's work has shown how, in the efforts to transform dominant ways of knowing, feminist scholars seek to redraw existing boundaries of 'proper' and credible knowledge. However, my article does not focus exclusively on the practices of establishing the credibility of feminist scholarship but instead approaches boundary-work more broadly to study how feminist knowledge is used to establish the legitimacy of the demands to transform institutionalized forms of economic thinking and policy.

In addition, to consider how feminist knowledge claims are used to promote transformative change in unequal institutions, I draw on feminist cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017, 2021) research on structural obstacles, or 'brick walls', to attempts to transform institutions. In her work, Ahmed has examined how feminist and antiracist make efforts to impact institutions come up against institutionalized power structures, norms and behaviors that prevent them from being effective. Furthermore, by examining the notions of feminist killjoys and feminist complaints, Ahmed has shown the role of affects and emotions both in the efforts to transform institutions and in resistance to them (Ahmed, 2012, 2017, 2021). More specifically, I employ Ahmed's ideas to investigate how institutionalized power structures shape the forms that feminist knowledge claims take and how far they can travel. By bringing together theorizing on boundary-work and brick walls, I contribute novel perspectives to the literature on institutional resistance to feminist transformation (Cullen et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016).

1.2 | Data and methodology

This article uses interviews from a research project exploring gendered knowledge-policy relations and feminist alternatives to dominant understandings of economic discourse, knowledge and policy. The 20 interviews analyzed in the article were conducted over a 3-year period (2021–2023) with an international group of feminist professionals with expertise in the economy and experience in influencing economic policymaking. The participants were identified based on their involvement in feminist networks that use (macro)economic analysis to develop feminist alternatives to mainstream economic thinking and policies. Of the 20 participants, 15 were scholars based in academia, while the remaining five worked as policy advisors and experts in different national and international organizations, such as NGOs. Most of the academically oriented participants were economists by training, while others had disciplinary backgrounds in other fields, such as political economy, social policy, and gender studies. Furthermore, although some participants focused more on foundational academic work, such as developing feminist economic analysis, most emphasized combining research with policy work and activism. At the time of the interviews, the participants were situated in eight countries in the Global North—mostly in the UK and North America but also in Northern and Central Europe. Many participants had an explicitly transnational and global focus in their work.

The participants were recruited based on a preliminary mapping of the field as well as through snowballing. The semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 1 hour each. I conducted 18 of these interviews, while project lead Hanna Ylöstalo conducted two. The interviews began by informing the

participants of their rights, explaining the purposes of the research and introducing the consent form. Although the interview topics varied slightly according to the role and expertise of each participant, all interviews covered common themes. These included interviewees' experiences of trying to impact economic thinking and policy, the role of expertise and evidence in promoting feminist politics and efforts to democratize the debate about the economy.

After the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, I analyzed them thematically in two stages. In the first stage, I searched for recurring themes and patterns guided by my research questions; in the second, I performed a more theoretically informed close analysis of the participants' knowledge transfer practices. When examining the feminist experts' boundary-work practices, I particularly focused on how the participants reframed feminist knowledge claims to gain legitimacy in 'mainstream' epistemic and institutional contexts that are not always favorable to feminist perspectives. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work that deals with the repetitive and arduous attempts to transform institutions, I also considered how feminists look for ways to make an impact while trying to overcome institutional resistance to feminist demands. The analysis was guided by my understanding of feminist knowledge about the economy as a set of plural and sometimes conflicting epistemic positions that analyze interlocking systems of power and oppression to overcome intersectional inequalities in the economic system (e.g., Power, 2004; Prügl, 2021).

The following analysis mostly focuses on what the participants shared, that is, their aim to impact existing thinking and policies using feminist knowledge. Nevertheless, I wish to highlight that there is no single approach to feminist economic knowledge or policy. Thus, rather than being unanimous, the participants differed in their epistemic and political stances. Although I have sought to make these differences visible in the analysis, I have not read the participants' framings as indicating their 'true' or 'real' intentions in any straightforward sense. Rather, I approach the participants' negotiations as highly contextual efforts in ongoing feminist struggles to redraw the boundaries of 'proper' knowledge (see Pereira, 2017, pp. 127–128).

Protecting anonymity requires particular attention when studying high-profile individuals in small communities (see Pereira, 2017, p. 13). As the networks of feminists combining (macro)economic expertise with policy work are small—in some observed countries, they were centered around a handful of individuals—my reporting of the data required careful consideration. To give readers sufficient context, I have chosen to describe the participants with short qualifiers (e.g., economist) and to use numbers to distinguish between them. However, other information not directly relevant to answering the research questions, such as a participant's research domain or country, has been withheld.

1.3 | Shifting the boundaries of economic knowledge and policy

This section analyzes how feminist experts deploy feminist knowledge to shift the boundaries of legitimate economic knowledge and policy. More specifically, it examines the feminist boundary-work claims used to establish the credibility of feminist knowledge in interactions with decision-makers, mainly politicians and government officials. As feminist scholarship on gendered institutions has shown, intersecting power relations shape organizations and institutions both nominally and substantively (Acker, 1990, 1992; Waylen, 2014). In institutions governing economic policy, such institutionalized inequality is reflected in epistemic hierarchies and political priorities. As many feminist scholars have shown, decision-makers and economic policy processes often rely on mainstream macroeconomic approaches, which, while seemingly neutral, are inscribed with a series of biases. Biased *knowledge*—like blindness to the contributions of unpaid care and reproductive work in key metrics, such as gross domestic product (GDP)—leads to biased *policies* with gendered, classed, and racialized outcomes (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Folbre & Nelson, 2000; O'Hagan & Klatzer, 2018; Waring, 1988; Young et al., 2011; Young, 2023).

In resonance with these ideas, the interviewed feminist experts emphasized that prevalent understandings of legitimate knowledge about the economy are crucial for the everyday lives of people and the future of our societies.

Consequently, their boundary-work attempted to challenge conventional economic policies and knowledge with feminist perspectives. One expert argued for the need for feminist knowledge as follows:

> [If] you don't see how [unpaid labour] plays a critical role in ensuring economies, you also don't realise [that] government and employers can put a lot of additional burden on unpaid labour, simply because it will be continued to be performed and get done. So, it becomes a means of exploitation of those who engage in unpaid labour, that's dominantly women and girls. And it's all very convenient because you can have, for example, these fiscal austerity measures that cut down on public services, and governments and employers implicitly know that those services will continue to be performed in unpaid form.
>
> (Interview 1, feminist economist)

In this excerpt, the economist points to tangible, performative effects of economic analysis: the failure to recognize unpaid labor leads to policies that exacerbate gender inequality, as governments can offload the responsibilities of this labor onto households—an argument often made in feminist analyses of austerity and structural adjustment policies (e.g., Bakker, 1994, 2023; Elomäki et al., 2023; Pearson & Elson, 2015). Furthermore, observing that this is 'convenient' for some, the economist challenges the widespread idea that conventional macroeconomic approaches are objective and value free. Similar boundary-work claims can be found in the following statement by another feminist economist, who suggested that conventionally used macroeconomics approaches are so focused on markets and narrow measures of economic growth that they fail to see the 'bigger picture':

> Look around, there are wildfires and floods and everything else around here. What kind of economy, what kind of world do we want to live in? (…) We have tended to leave to economists to determine the goal: 'Well, yeah, we *do* want to do something good for the environment, but *only* if it doesn't slow GDP growth too much.' That is brain-dead. Because economics, if you look at the core theories, never really took seriously all of the unpaid contributions of the environment and all of the unpaid and underpaid contributions the women have historically put in.
>
> (Interview 2, feminist economist)

This economist redraws the boundaries of legitimate knowledge by suggesting that feminist knowledge about the economy is more holistic than conventional perspectives. Building on key feminist economics ideas (Nelson, 1995; Waring, 1988), she questions the legitimacy of conventional measures of economic progress, such as GDP growth, by highlighting that when it comes to policy, the ignorance of the contributions of the environment and women's unpaid and underpaid (care) work leads to detrimental consequences.

Taken together, the above attempts to shift the boundaries of economic knowledge argue that conventional economic approaches need to be challenged to avoid costly repercussions for gender equality and the planet. Thus, these boundary-work claims are situated in broader struggles over what activities produce economic value as well as the boundaries between the economy and its outside (Fraser, 2017; Mazzucato, 2018).

Such boundary struggles shaped the experts' attempts to influence economic policy. However, as previous research has suggested, the privileging of mainstream economics in the epistemic hierarchies of policymaking imposes limits on feminists' knowledge-based claims (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2024, pp. 149–179). These challenges are illustrated in the following quotation:

> Obviously, there's a huge wealth of feminist economic analysis to draw upon. (…) That [feminist analysis] is quite a useful challenge at times to the more established or traditional economic mindsets that are dismissive of other forms of knowledge. Of course, nobody likes to be told their deficiency, so

> it's about how you manage the introduction of these other forms of knowledge to take people with you rather than further entrench their antipathy to what you're trying to do.
>
> (Interview 3, feminist scholar)

This quotation captures crucial elements that shape feminist experts' efforts to transform economic policy: it not only points to the institutional resistance and antipathy to feminist knowledge but also suggests that epistemic and political hierarchies shape considerations of how to get feminist messages across. As Ahmed (2017) has argued, power structures shape what demands are likely to 'pass' institutionally and travel forward. Thus, transforming institutions involves strategic work, which in turn means 'trying on' different words, styles, and methods of argumentation to see which arguments 'are useful', 'travel furthest', or 'enable you to get a message through' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 98).

Although such considerations were frequent among the participants, their ideas of how to 'strategically' advance feminist knowledge claims varied. For example, one participant (Interview 4, feminist economist) was less critical than the others of conventional macroenomic perspectives. She said that when speaking to non-feminist audiences, she would advocate gender equality by suggesting that 'the society gains [not only] in terms of justice and human rights but also in terms of economic gains and efficiency'. This quotation implies that adapting feminist messages to the priorities of growth and profit in mainstream macroeconomics is a useful way of getting one's foot in the door.

However, most participants' policy work drew on the kind of feminist economic analysis presented in the beginning of this section. Consequently, they perceived the efficiency argument as a problem because it worked to consolidate the dominant values and priorities of economic policymaking instead of challenging them. One expert, who had had a long career as an economist and had interacted a lot with decision-makers, warned that the 'growth argument' is not a 'silver bullet':

> It [growth] is a more comfortable discussion to have if you're talking with government ministers or economic ministries and their officials, but that doesn't mean they're going to be convinced by it. So I think you always have to remind them of the human rights obligations, (…) start to break outside the box a bit and think, 'Yes, but is economic growth the only objective that you want to have for your country?'
>
> (Interview 5, feminist economist)

As we can see, the above two approaches differ in their epistemic and political stances. The former highlights efforts to incorporate gender equality concerns within the existing architectures of economic governance, while the latter emphasizes the need to more substantially re-envision the priorities of economic policy. Finally, they express contrary views of what arguments are 'useable' in establishing the credibility of feminist knowledge demands.

However, the relationship of feminist experts' epistemic and political convictions to their boundary-work practices was not as straightforward as might be concluded from the previous excerpts. Rather, as Pereira (2017, p. 129) also observes, boundary-work claims 'need to be situated within, and interpreted in relation to, the institutional, material and epistemic context of their production'. In other words, feminists' boundary-work claims do not necessarily stem from their 'real' or a priori fixed positions but from interactions between feminist boundary-workers and (often non-feminist) audiences (Pereira, 2017, pp. 127–129). This contextuality of boundary-work was frequently negotiated by feminist economic experts. One scholar said that she reframed her arguments and modified her expressions in ways that she believed would help convince particular audiences. For example, when she tried to persuade mainstream macroeconomists and policymakers to acknowledge unpaid labor, she did not speak about 'social reproduction' but rather about the 'care economy' or 'women's hidden labor in the household' (Interview 6, feminist scholar). I interpret this practice to mean that although the concept of social reproduction has been a crucial lens in critical feminist scholarship for analyzing the role of care and life-generating

activities in sustaining capitalist societies (e.g., Bakker & Gill, 2003; Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2004), its usefulness as a 'tool' is weakened by its association with Marxist feminism. These remarks show that depending on the context, feminist knowledge is sometimes likelier to be acknowledged if 'cut off' from its critical, feminist background (Pereira, 2012).

Like many participants, the above-quoted scholar had plenty of experience advising governments and decision-makers at different levels. She had thus given a lot of consideration to useful ways of reframing feminist arguments for different audiences. In addition, this experience made her aware of the risks involved in reframing feminist claims into seemingly neutral and apolitical statements (see Ferguson, 2014):

> I think most feminist economists would recognise it's a balancing act. Because you want to make inroads, but you don't necessarily want to appropriate the entire language of mainstream macroeconomics. (…) I can rely on some of that [mainstream] research to validate certain feminist economic arguments. But at the same time, you also don't want to fall into their trap of seeing gender equality as an efficiency question.
>
> (Interview 6, feminist scholar)

As powerfully argued in previous research, attempts to simultaneously pass as a neutral expert while also promoting transformative politics are a source of tension and ambivalence in feminist knowledge transfer (e.g., Elomäki et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Ylöstalo, 2020). The above quotation shows how feminist economic experts deal with such tensions by combining pragmatic practices and subversive politics: for example, feminist experts can selectively employ mainstream language while simultaneously challenging its underlying values and priorities (see also Lamberg et al., 2023). The above participant, concretely describing such balancing acts, referred to feminist economics research examining recovery options after the COVID-19 pandemic. The calculations considered in this research (see De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021) suggested that public investments in the care sector would be economically more efficient than investments in the construction sector. However, these arguments were helpful not only because they showed that investments in social infrastructure would yield 'more bang for the buck' but also because they reframed the social and healthcare sectors as critical *social infrastructure* in need of investment. This, the participant argued, was important because it enabled to 'shift the lens of how we look at how governments spend money and where they invest'.

The interviews with feminist experts also showed how their balancing acts involved emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and extended to managing appearances. For example, the scholar who suggested that introducing feminist demands involved considering 'how to take people with you' said that feminist claims are at risk of being dismissed as 'complaints':

> To complain feeds into the, well… 'That's all you feminists ever do is complain. We're doing all of this wonderful stuff, and you're still complaining.' (…) I mean, confrontation isn't a problem, friction isn't a problem, but you want the relationships that you have with government, with other influencers, to be more nuanced than that and to be more multidimensional than critiquing all the time.
>
> (Interview 3, feminist scholar)

The excerpt resonates with Sara Ahmed's (2017, 2021) observations that positioning feminists as 'killjoys' or 'complainers' can stop them from getting their message through. This is because in gendered institutions, audiences might assume that a problem would stop existing if feminists simply stopped talking—as if the feminist killjoy who brought the problem up caused it. Although the above quotation emphasizes the need for feminists to selectively distance themselves from the feminist killjoy to appeal to particular audiences, I wish to highlight that the participant did not think that feminists should give up the killjoy position by remaining silent about existing injustices and inequalities. Rather, she explained that feminists should not only just react with critique to

governments' policies but also actively promote their own visions of alternative policies. Nevertheless, this echoes previous research suggesting that when feminist experts seek to convince decision-makers, it may be useful to maintain emotional control and hide 'hot' emotions, such as anger (Elomäki et al., 2019).

In sum, although previous research on the politics of feminist knowledge transfer has distinguished between feminist experts who are pragmatic insiders and those who are critical outsiders (Bustelo et al., 2016), my findings suggest that many participants' boundary-work highlighted the importance of holding on to both roles. In addition, the findings complicate simple divisions into 'pure' and 'co-opted' feminist knowledge (Cullen et al., 2019, p. 767) by showing that the use of specialized knowledge and economic arguments does not prevent feminist boundary-workers from promoting transformative demands, even if epistemic and political contexts shape how they reframe these demands in order to be heard.

1.4 | Encountering and overcoming brick walls

This section considers how feminist boundary-workers negotiated the institutional resistances to their work and how they attempted to overcome such resistance. To this end, I employ Ahmed's (2012, 2017) work on 'brick walls', which refer to the obstacles that hinder feminist attempts to transform institutions. The experience of confronting brick walls often characterized the reception of the feminist economic experts' boundary-work. Many of them described that even when they were heard in policymaking processes, they seemed to run into invisible institutional obstacles. One participant described this experience by saying that although there is 'a lot of positive rhetoric and warm reception given to a range of potentially transformational recommendations', governments nevertheless tend to inadequately operationalize their commitments. She also suggested that even when her arguments about social infrastructure were well received, the conventional mindset proved difficult to overcome:

> I think I have a difficulty, which is that I can go to any meeting and convince people of the importance of social infrastructure. Then, I can read what this organisation is doing three weeks later, and it's as though I haven't spoken. They will use the term infrastructure to mean bridges and roads, et cetera, again. So, I think people hear it, but it hasn't yet had the effect of changing the way they think about other things. (…) So, they all think this is a good idea, but it hasn't changed their whole views of the economy. (…) People agree, and then they forget about it.
>
> (Interview 8, feminist economist)

This excerpt illustrates an occasion of boundary-work that seemed successful before the significant gap between the warm reception and the impact of the participant's boundary-work became evident. This gap can be interpreted using Ahmed's (2012) idea of *non-performativity*, which suggests that performative claims may not operate effectively because the required institutional conditions are not in place; as a result, one runs into a brick wall. According to Ahmed (2012), some claims fail to achieve their objectives because performativity depends on the repetition of conventions and prior acts of authorization. We can see these acts of authorization at work above, when the participant lamented that feminist arguments have not changed how people perceive the economy as a whole. This is because the mainstream economic mindset, often repeated and powerfully authorized, limits the performativity of contrary, alternative mindsets.

Although I have discussed how feminist economic analysis and concepts can be used to promote transformative policies, the analysis also shows that the same tools can be either performative or non-performative depending on the context. Several participants' interviews suggested that this was sometimes the case with governments adopting gender budgeting. Gender budgeting is an instrument designed to assess the gendered and distributive impacts of budgetary decisions and a tool for seeing budgetary processes as contested political spaces that can advance or hinder feminist policy change (O'Hagan & Klatzer, 2018). One participant, who had worked on gender

budgeting for a long time and had seen in different countries how it can 'really make a difference' or become 'a tick-box exercise', stated the following:

> For a progressive government, this [gender budgeting] is a set of tools that they can then use and feel comfortable with because it's also helping to implement more effectively some of the progressive policies that they've already decided on. Where it's difficult is when you have governments that only pay lip service to gender equality. They've trivialised and minimised what gender budgeting is about to make it just counting the amount of money that's spent on a few special women's projects. They say look, 'Aren't we doing well, we're spending this money on women's projects'. But it's only ever a tiny percentage of the overall expenditure, and it doesn't make them rethink their overall macroeconomic policy.
>
> (Interview 5, feminist economist)

Similarly, another participant mentioned that without real commitment from a government, gender budgeting risks becoming 'lip service': 'They need to do it because it's both in the constitution and in the legal basis for the budgeting, but what they offer is not making any substantial change' (Interview 9, feminist policy advisor).

Similar dynamics were discussed vis-à-vis the EU and international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Sometimes, these institutions adopt certain insights and language from feminist economic analysis, but they do not apply this analysis to their own policies. As a result, the goals of economic growth and narrowly defined financial stability, as well as ideologies such as austerity, continue to be favored over the goals of gender equality, social justice, and well-being (see also Elomäki, 2023). These experiences echo Ahmed's (2012, 2021) argument that feminist efforts to transform institutions can be used by institutions as evidence that they have been transformed. Paradoxically, then, formally agreeing to feminist demands can be a way for those in power to stop such demands from traveling further (Ahmed, 2017). For example, formal commitment to gender budgeting can be used by governments to suggest that their economic policies promote gender equality. The experiences of brick walls associated with non-performativity are also indicative of how formal and informal power dynamics work in patriarchal institutions and organizations. Although feminists can impact governments and change formal rules, as in the case of governments adopting gender budgeting, there can be significant gaps between institutional designs and policy implementations on the ground (see Waylen, 2014), which can turn potentially transformative tools into box-ticking exercises.

Importantly, the participants' experiences of brick walls also offer a perspective on the emotionally arduous labor involved in institutional transformation. For many, the repetitive nature of their boundary-work and the need to prove one's position as legitimate time after time caused frustration and tiredness. One participant described how officials in her government invited feminist experts 'again and again and again' to engage in policymaking in different kinds of advisory roles:

> Twenty years of saying the same thing gets really frustrating, particularly when you're saying it to the same people, and they are receiving it as fresh information. That's really annoying, but you can't really let that show. You have to keep up a nice face and keep your patience, but it's difficult.
>
> (Interview 3, feminist scholar)

Another expert stated that 'it's a bit tiring to work on these issues where you see that you cannot do much progress in terms of social innovation or social justice' (Interview 9, feminist policy advisor). These conflicting experiences of frustration and even anger, without being able to let it show, indicate the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983) and emotional labor of feminist economic expertise; they are also related to the imperative of not appearing to be a killjoy, as analyzed above. In her analysis of academic boundary-work, Pereira (2019) used Ahmed's ideas of non-performativity to show how sociopolitical inequalities shape which perspectives are

understood as legitimate and credible. As Pereira notes, failures in some knowledge producers' boundary-work should not be seen as random or occasional but as integral, structural, and constitutive of boundary-work in patriarchal and racist societies, even though deterministic conceptualizations of social inequalities and non-performativity in boundary-work should be avoided. I suggest that the emotional experiences of frustration and tiredness are responses to these structural constraints.

One participant (Interview 5, feminist economist) explicitly used the metaphor of a brick wall to say that trying to influence her government to adopt gender budgeting 'feels like we're banging our heads against a brick wall'. This suggests that in challenging mainstream positions, feminist boundary-workers are likely to run into institutional obstacles that can disqualify their knowledge-production practices. However, despite being frustrating, brick walls were not a surprise to the feminist economic experts. None of the participants thought that broad institutional transformation would be easy—after all, their practices stemmed from noticing the institutional injustices and inequalities inherent in the silences and biases of macroeconomic governance.

When encountering obstacles, many participants emphasized the importance of focusing on long-term goals. Discussing how to deal with institutional obstacles to feminist attempts to transform economic policy, many participants underlined the importance of hope and patience. The expert who expressed how frustrating it was to maintain 'a nice face and keep your patience' said that when encountering resistance, she tried to think that 'there's always tomorrow, and we can have another attempt' (Interview 3, feminist scholar). As the pronoun 'we' in this quotation suggests, the feminist economic experts' networks were important support systems in sustaining their work when facing brick walls. One participant (Interview 6, feminist scholar) described the international feminist community as follows: 'When one person is down and they think, "Oh, we are never going to get anywhere with this," you can say, "No, you know, I just had this conversation, and we think this is going to be happening."' At the same time, another participant took distance from an explicitly hopeful disposition, suggesting that even if there is no guarantee of success, it is worth persevering:

> Sometimes, people ask me the hope question, like, 'How hopeful are you?' And I feel like hope is much less important than just determination and patience. You know, like, we can't really know if it's going to work, but we know what we should do, regardless of what prospects for success are. This is what we have to do.
>
> (Interview 10, feminist economist)

Thus, in addition to the figure of the 'feminist killjoy' discussed in the previous section, the participants' practices invoked another figure theorized by Ahmed (2016), namely, the willful subject. Similar to the feminist killjoy, willfulness has often been used to describe how subjects become the cause of their own unhappiness because there are costs related to being willing. However, Ahmed (2016) reclaimed willfulness to show that feminism involves a willingness to persevere. The importance of persisting was discussed by one of the participants. She said that she 'would never despair' and that she does not expect 'immediate impacts' on government policy. She continued,

> But I think this is true for all progressive organisations that are trying to get government to address poverty, inequality, the climate emergency and so forth. It's much easier to do this [work] when you have a government which has more basic sympathies with these objectives. But [when you don't] you have to, then, go again to education, you have to be training the next generation of economists who will develop [feminist economic analysis] further.
>
> (Interview 5, feminist economist)

Here, willfulness is evident in the participant's emphasis on continuity and the need to educate new experts who could use their expertise to challenge conventional economic mindsets and promote alternative ways of

thinking. Such depictions of incremental and processual transition achieved through repetition and attrition characterized the participants' boundary-work. Several participants stated that although political institutions cannot be changed instantly, it was still possible to transform them over time (see Waylen, 2014). Their ideas also resonate with the work of Pereira (2017), who emphasizes that struggles over legitimacy and epistemic status can never be complete. As such, they demand active and continuous boundary-work. This work can be particularly arduous for feminist boundary-workers, as they are often in precarious epistemic and institutional positions compared to those in the mainstream (Pereira, 2017, pp. 61–62; see also Skeggs, 2008). However, as Ahmed observes (2017, pp. 113–114), feminists gain knowledge of institutions from attempts to transform them and from the resistance they encounter, which forces them to become more inventive. Thus, repetitive boundary-work and cumulative experience of brick walls can help feminist experts reframe feminist knowledge claims for particular audiences in context-specific situations.

These accounts of gradual and continuous boundary-work toward the large-scale transformation of structural economic relations resonate with the findings of Rai et al. (2014), who have combined feminist and environmental economics approaches to measure the depletion of human energies caused by social reproduction responsibilities, that is, to measure the gendered, classed, and racialized human costs of doing care. Discussing the contemporary political context, particularly the structural non-recognition of social reproduction, they suggest that although the large-scale transformation of structural economic relations remains unfeasible, attempting to transform political institutions remains imperative. Thus, 'if we see successful transformation not as a single revolutionary event but as a bundle of changes that may add up to transformation in the longer term, then we may find some elements of that bundle emerging through these struggles for gender equality' (Rai et al., 2014, p. 100).

Despite my analysis of boundary-work emphasizing the role of knowledge claims in feminist struggles to transform political institutions, these struggles not only involve knowledge but also primarily politics (see also Ylöstalo, 2023). Indeed, many participants suggested that political institutions cannot be changed by engaging with decision-makers only. Shirin M. Rai, whose research was quoted above, was one of the experts interviewed for this study, and we agreed that her quotations would not be anonymized. Rai referred to Audre Lorde (1984) to suggest that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. She said,

> We need to be able to work [with and] in the state as femocrats, as bureaucrats, as people who are able to influence policy, but at the same time, we need to be outside the state and critiquing it, holding it to account. You cannot just be part of the state, right? Because you get co-opted then.
>
> (Interview 7, Shirin M. Rai, feminist political economist)

Another scholar had been involved in several advisory boards for governments and international organizations. She discussed the limits of collaborating with existing institutions in a similar way, wryly suggesting that the problem with advisory boards is that 'they are just advisory', that is, governments have no obligation to follow the recommendations. She said:

> For me, the biggest challenge is not interacting on the boards or getting the reports out. The biggest challenge is what happens after that. (…) I suppose the idea is that you put out something in the hope that someone somewhere will pick it up and run with it. But that running doesn't happen unless there is a political context and a sufficient amount of popular mobilisation.
>
> (Interview 1, feminist economist)

Thus, although feminist expertise and evidence can provide tools for transforming economic discourse and policy, to take down existing brick walls, feminist experts must influence popular opinion on the economy. Relatedly, challenging oppressive power structures and shifting the terrain of economic discourse and policy cannot be done by experts alone. Rather, placing gender equality, social justice, and environmental sustainability as priorities

of economic policy requires a broad movement. Such a movement can then help build a society in which feminist experts' knowledge demands would be fully successful.

2 | CONCLUSION

This article provides novel insights into the politics of feminist knowledge transfer by examining how feminist professionals use knowledge about the economy to impact economic thinking and policy. First, I analyzed how feminist experts seek to shift the boundaries of legitimate economic knowledge and policy as well as unpacked how they reframe their arguments to get their message through to decision-makers. Second, I examined how feminists negotiate institutional obstacles when trying to transform institutions, as well as the transformative possibilities of feminist knowledge and politics in overcoming such obstacles. The article's analysis of feminist boundary-work and brick walls sheds new light on the tensions between technical knowledge and feminist transformative politics (e.g., Cullen et al., 2019; Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2024; Ferguson, 2018). The findings show that although feminist boundary-work attempts to substantially transform conventional understandings of economic policy and its priorities, establishing the credibility of feminist knowledge involves complex and messy balancing acts. For example, the interviewed boundary-workers needed to reframe their knowledge claims for non-feminist audiences, while avoiding pitfalls related to the 'co-optation' of their arguments. In addition, boundary-work entails managing emotions and appearances, as balancing acts are needed when oscillating between conflicting dispositions: angry yet calm, optimistic yet realistic, and pragmatic yet critical.

Therefore, boundary-work practices can be read as highly contextual efforts to push ahead in unequal institutions, where 'wholesale replacement of old rules with new ones is unlikely to be a common gender change strategy because it relies on the absence of a strong veto' (Waylen, 2014, p. 218). My findings highlight that boundary-workers with precarious epistemic status, such as feminists in institutions of financial governance, need to know the political and epistemic contexts in which they work to be able to establish the legitimacy of feminist knowledge. Based on prior experiences of trying to transform institutions, feminists can learn to anticipate resistance and modify their claims (see also Ahmed, 2017), which can make their boundary-work likelier to succeed. However, although encountering brick walls could push feminists to invent new ways of being heard, the institutional, epistemic, and political conditions were often not in place for the participants' boundary-work to become effective. In fact, even seemingly successful boundary-work can sometimes come up against brick walls and turn out to be non-performative.

Nonetheless, despite the institutionalized socioeconomic inequalities and repeated authorizations of hegemonic forms of economic thinking limiting the transformative possibilities of feminist economic experts' boundary-work, the non-performativity of feminist knowledge claims is not inevitable. This was clear in the participants' emphasis on persevering and persisting. In fact, the participants' understanding of policy transformation as a long game represents a form of 'cathedral thinking'. Used in environmental sustainability thinking, this expression describes commitment to long-term projects and to future generations' well-being, as cathedrals take several generations to complete (Friberg, 2022). While pursuing the long-term goal of substantially transforming economic thinking and policy, the participants sought to achieve incremental changes. However, instead of only building new structures, their work involved dismantling existing unequal structures. Because of this long-term focus, feminist experts' knowledge-based demands resemble what feminist political theorist Kathi Weeks (2011) termed 'utopian demands'. As defined by Weeks (2011), utopian demands, which are grounded in actually existing, credible tendencies, not only aim for narrowly pragmatic reforms but also seek to substantially transform social relations. Thus, multiple ideological, institutional, and discursive shifts would have to occur for them to become fully feasible (Weeks, 2011, pp. 175–225). Approached as utopian demands, the participants' boundary-work practices can be seen as willful efforts to build futures in which feminist demands would also become fully effective and performative.

To conclude, I consider directions for future research. First, to address the interconnected global crises of economy, care, inequality, and the climate that are rooted in the crises and contradictions of contemporary capitalism, it remains imperative to understand how hegemonic forms of economic knowledge and policy exacerbate these crises and perpetuate intersectional inequalities. Although I have relied on interview-based accounts, the role of feminist knowledge in advocating socioeconomic transformation should also be studied ethnographically. Additionally, all of the interviewed boundary-workers were situated in the Global North. Thus, more work is needed on feminist praxis in the Global South. Second, I have touched on the limits of expert knowledge in feminist struggles and raised the question of building alliances and broader coalitions. Focusing more closely on the possibilities of and limits to building such alliances—not only between feminist experts and activists but also with other progressive movements globally promoting social and environmental justice—is crucial for understanding how to achieve socioeconomic transformation. This task is particularly urgent if we want to seize the rapidly closing window of opportunity for updating the global economic system to one that would operate within planetary boundaries while securing well-being for all.

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