

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

## Feministizing Policymaking in Practice: How Gender and Politics Scholarship Inspires Government Policy, and Vice Versa<sup>1</sup>

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If a Ministry of Equality and Feminisms were created from scratch in the government of your country or region, would you accept leading it? In May 2021, when asked by the just-invested Prime Minister of the Government of Catalonia, I answered, “Yes, I do.” It was a big question, and the task ahead was even bigger, but a close friend helped me kill the vertigo. She said, “Years of gender and politics research, consultancy work, and social activism should do,” while adding that being accorded great leeway to build up a team of social movement activists, feminist academics, and party feminists with experience in executive office was a unique opportunity to bolster feminist change. This combination yielded substantive knowledge of both the priorities of the movements and the political world and, simultaneously, accorded personal ties with politicians and the bureaucratic elite (Mazur and McBride 2007).

The feminist pledges that figured prominently in the electoral platform of the Prime Minister’s party, the Republican Left of Catalonia (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, ERC), including the creation of such cabinet portfolio, reflected and responded to the strength of the women’s movement in Catalonia. In the previous years, it had staged some of the most massive demonstrations in Europe, including the first women’s strikes within Spain. The inclusion of “Feminisms” in the ministry’s name was a powerful political statement. The plural “s” acknowledged the diversity of the movement and embraced intersectional feminism, matching the purview of the new portfolio: women’s rights, gender-based violence, equity in paid and unpaid work and care policies, LGBTI+ rights, equal treatment and non-discrimination, anti-racism, and migration and refugee policy.

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ERC is a left-wing, pro-independence party with strong internal equality policies and structures. For over a decade, I had acted in this organization as a “feminist critical friend” (Chappell and Mackay 2021) and even as a “feminist academic critical actor” (Childs 2024), on matters related to the adoption and implementation of the party’s internal equality policies, the engendering of the debates on Catalonia’s independence, and the drafting of the gender action plan of the Parliament of Catalonia, which I coordinated. Other factors also led me to accept the invitation. Party feminists stood up for my appointment and I could afford an academic leave, as I had been promoted to full professor a few months earlier and, as per the electoral legislation, the university must guarantee me this position upon my return.

Social activists celebrated the creation of the new ministry, and the press presented it as “a step to further a historic struggle, (...) a major breakthrough.”<sup>2</sup> Insights from gender and politics scholarship, particularly from feminist institutionalism, have been extremely useful for instituting feminist policies from this new portfolio. Simultaneously, through political practice I have learned several lessons on equalities mainstreaming, re-gendering political processes, and feminist policymaking.

### Pushing Gender Equitable Institutional Change Forward

Some enabling factors have been key to bolstering feminist redesign in Catalonia, particularly the strong commitment of the senior party of the coalition government, a high-ranking structure led by feminists, and a proactive role of party feminists — including the party’s secretary-general — and the Prime Minister in empowering me and the new ministry vis-à-vis the other ministries. Together, we generated new conditions for gender equitable institutional change to happen. A key policy lever was the drafting of the government plan, which was structured around four axes, namely social, green, democratic, and feminist transformations. This document outlines the political initiatives to be developed during the four-year legislative term, and it builds on the electoral pledges of the coalition partners and the parties that lend parliamentary support to the investiture vote. This is also the moment in which relatively abstract electoral pledges are concretized and new actions can be included. This allowed us to incorporate actions that were not present in the electoral manifestoes, such as a bill on transgender rights, a bill against racism, or an action plan to support human rights defenders and protect them from attacks perpetrated by anti-gender and anti-rights groups.

In the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms, we saw the drafting of the government’s plan as an opportunity for more capacious gender and equalities mainstreaming. Whereas the other ministries only paid attention to their sectoral policies, we reviewed the whole document and moved several actions to the feminist transformation axis. We selected those that, even if they had to be executed by other ministries, needed to be fully coordinated by us, such as any policy related to gender-based violence. This empowered us to draft a framework-protocol that establishes due diligence standards for all public interventions regarding both prevention and reparation, which has led to the revision of extant

sectoral protocols (health, social services, and education, for instance) and the elaboration of new protocols (universities, film industry and the performing arts, among others).

We applied the same logic to policy areas that, only if led or co-designed by us, would be a priority in the political agenda and build on a feminist approach, such as sexual and reproductive rights (SRR). For example, including a National Strategy for Sexual and Reproductive Rights in the feminist transformation axis bolstered institutional change in several ways. First, it shifted the frame from a health issue to a rights issue, thereby broadening the scope and the domains wherein these rights must be guaranteed.<sup>3</sup> Second, we institutionalized our leadership by creating an interdepartmental committee chaired by Equality and Feminisms, with the Ministry of Health holding the deputy chair. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only all-government SRR policy across the globe, with the participation of all cabinet portfolios, including the Ministry of Interior — important, as we needed police cooperation to prevent vinyl-wrapped buses with transphobic messages, funded by anti-gender groups, from circulating in the streets of Catalonia, as well as to prevent anti-rights groups from protesting in front of abortion clinics. Third, we gained the capacity to spur the action of other ministries to guarantee SRR. For example, we introduced sexuality education as curricular content in the decrees updating pre-school, primary, and secondary education curricula. This means that schools cannot opt out nor can parents exclude their children from this educational content.

There has been no trade-off between mainstreaming feminism across all axes and having a specific axis. Indeed, incorporating actions from all policy fields into the feminist transformation axis has been decisive in making the whole government deliver feminist policies. Among others, these include the creation of gender committees in public hospitals to eradicate gender blindness and biases in diagnoses and treatments; the establishment of a 40% quota for women applicants in the police and firefighter corps; the funding of a 12-month contract for undocumented migrants in local public administrations to fight the dispossession of rights caused by administrative irregularity; the introduction of free university tuition fees for survivors of gender-based violence (beyond intimate partner violence); and an increase in economic contributions to UNWRA in Gaza, after several countries withdrew their support, especially in relation to projects on SRR and GBV.

Most crucially, equal footing between the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms and other ministries created an important source of power, which we were sure to use. On the one hand, we rendered the political agenda more explicitly feminist, bringing to the fore issues and accelerating the adoption of policies that had long been a non-priority. For instance, the Government of Catalonia adopted an action plan against social, structural, and institutional racism, with 70 measures and an initial budget of 28 million euros. On the other hand, we instituted a practice of *ex ante* mainstreaming, gaining the capacity to have a say in all initiatives submitted for government approval that have an impact on equalities — not just through amendments prompted by *ex post* gender impact assessments, but through active participation in the co-design of policies.

Just as important was the capacity to stage top-level bilateral negotiations to design interdepartmental action plans that meet fundamental conditions, such as

alignment with structural approaches that address the roots of inequalities, budgetary commitments by each involved ministry, clear implementation time-lines, and specific governance structures to monitor and evaluate implementation. Some of these plans are global firsts, like the Menstruation and Climacteric Action Plan, the National Prevention Plan against Gender-Based Violence, the Action Plan to Address Obstetric Violence and Other Violations of Sexual and Reproductive Rights, and the Action Plan against Aesthetic Pressure. In addition, sitting at the cabinet table also confers veto power, which we used when needed to block initiatives that failed to meet the standards defined by equality laws or appointments to the boards of public bodies that did not comply with gender balance.

### Resistance and Counter-Resistance Strategies

Having the Prime Minister and the secretary-general of the party on our side allowed us to speed up, broaden, or unblock some initiatives with other ministries, although playing this card needs to be done both carefully and only in exceptional circumstances. While many ministers were very enthusiastic about the adoption of feminist policies, and did not seem to require an extra push, we took for granted that all feminist redesigns face resistance (Tildesley, Lombardo, and Verge 2022). This was particularly the case during the first year, when resistance was more active and more ideological in nature, because the government consisted of a coalition. In subsequent years, it became a single-party government, reducing the amount of active resistance against feminist government initiatives.

Yet, we also anticipated some forms of passive resistance. We were advancing changes that not everyone was ready to understand. For example, we faced challenges in making other ministries introduce new policies to prevent and provide recourse for institutional violence and discrimination, as senior officers of other ministries were not always familiar with these concepts. As a result of their lack of training, they were not always able to identify how their policies reproduce inequalities. Some also felt offended when gender or race biases were pinpointed.

We were also dealing with “nested newness” (Mackay 2014). We were “the new girls in town,” with new ideas and policy practices, but faced “sticky” gendered policy legacies (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010), such as compartmentalization of policies, lack of interministerial coordination, and little experience with *ex ante* mainstreaming. We knew that instituting feminist redesign was not an overnight change and that, on some occasions, we could only watch resistance unfold and prepare for the next round. On other occasions, we factored counter-resistance strategies into our policymaking.

The latter included carefully crafting our framing strategies. To increase the legitimacy of feminist policy, we recalled the obligations established by women’s rights and human rights covenants, as well as resolutions and recommendations by international organizations. We also used discourse that flagged the pioneering nature of our initiatives, so that the other ministries involved would be

enthusiastic about the measures. For example, we noted that Catalonia would be the first government to distribute free reusable menstrual products and the second — after New Zealand — to introduce a three-day leave from work to mourn miscarriages.

Another strategy aimed at building up legitimacy for the new policies consisted in carrying out broad grass-roots participatory processes, for instance, to advance anti-racist policies. We presented the results to the other ministries, showing how lived experiences with social, structural, and institutional racism unfold in all policy fields and impact people's well-being and material conditions. We also made sure that the first anti-racism training was provided to the personnel of our gender-based violence services, which helped us set an example for the personnel of all the ministries.

Lastly, we put conscious effort into crafting alliances, both within and outside the government. Alliances with second-level officeholders and top-ranked bureaucrats were instrumental in obtaining information on why a project stalled and which policy frames resonated more. With some of these actors, we had preexisting connections. With others, alliances had to be built from scratch through repeated meetings and extra doses of charm — as well as through specific trainings on equalities organized and provided by the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms. Allies who shared our goals and believed that change was long overdue could also “use” us to speed up feminist change within their ministry.

With non-state actors, we built numerous multi-stakeholder partnerships. One example is our alliance with the Council of Pharmaceutical Associations of Catalonia for the free distribution of reusable menstrual products (a cup, a pair of menstrual panties, or two cloth pads) to all women aged 10–60 years, as well as to transgender men and non-binary people who menstruate. This network of over 3,200 local pharmacies guaranteed access to these products and expert counsel throughout the country. Pharmacists' professional expertise on menstruation and menopause and, more generally, on sexual and reproductive rights was strengthened with training sessions provided by the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms. Recognition as community health agents has led pharmacists to be highly involved in the implementation of the policy well beyond the terms of the formalized alliance. For instance, they have organized talks to parents in schools and high schools and produced TikTok videos and Instagram stories to increase the outreach of this action.<sup>4</sup>

## Final Reflections

Whereas feminist scholars and activists share concerns about the risk of engaging with institutions, specifically fears of co-optation and appropriation, as well as dilution and reinterpretation of feminist discourses and practices (De Jong and Kimm 2017), we never personally experienced these feelings. This may be because the political commitment was sincere, or perhaps it was due to the fact that we were a whole team of feminists. All senior officers and political advisors of the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms would undoubtedly say “yes”

again, in line with scholars who claim that emancipatory movements cannot afford *not* to engage with institutions (Chappell 2002; True 2003). Broadening the political agenda, redefining mainstreaming, introducing new rights, calling out and addressing the causes and consequences of systems of oppression, or building as many feminist alliances and multi-stakeholder partnerships as possible, are by no means the “master’s tools.”

Three years in public office (May 2021–August 2024) has been a short time span to fully execute our wish list of feminist redesign. These constraints notwithstanding, our feminist political practice successfully disrupted the day-to-day work of the Government of Catalonia and generated policy changes with significant impacts on the lives of women, LGBTI+ people, migrants, and racialized communities. In a context of rising anti-gender and anti-rights groups, as well as a growing presence of the extreme right in political offices across the world, unapologetically intersectional feminist policies should be an imperative for democratic, progressive governments. We have demonstrated that gender equitable institutional change is possible through strategic maneuvering and political imagination. Feminist policies work, and they can indeed be adopted by all cabinet portfolios when a specific ministry led by feminists is empowered by the political party in government and by the Prime Minister.

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## Notes

1. This piece is a summary of the keynote lecture I was invited to give at the European Conference on Politics and Gender (ECPG) held at Ghent University on July 8–10, 2024. Since 2009, the Standing Group on Gender and Politics of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) has organized this biennial conference to bring together the global community of scholars in the field.
2. See, for example, <https://www.ccma.cat/324/la-conselleria-de-feminismes-i-igualtat-un-pas-per-avancar-en-una-lluita-historica/noticia/3098125/> (Retrieved July 22, 2024).
3. Besides abortion, long-term contraception, sexuality education, respected childbirth, assisted reproduction, prevention of STDs and HIV, and specialized non-pathologizing transgender health care, we introduced new SRRs, namely the right to menstrual equity, the right to mourn miscarriages, the right to eradicate obstetric violence and other violations of SRR, and the right to a diligent governmental response against anti-gender and anti-rights groups.
4. In four months since the launch of the action, over 400,000 menstrual products had already been distributed.

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