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**Constructing a European Culture of Gender Equality on Social Media:
European and National (mis)Alignments**

Policy brief

Executive summary

This policy brief summarizes and operationalizes the findings of the author's individual research in the context of *Gender and cultures of equality in Europe – GRACE Project*. This summary and recommendations are based on a three-year investigation of the production and circulation of narratives of gender equality on the social media platform Twitter by a sample of gender equality institutions, women's rights activists, LGBTI rights activists, and private users. The study gathered data across the supranational-national divide, with part of the sample referring to the supranational level of 'Europe' and part of the sample referring to a national case study on Italy. The study analyzes what 'gender equality' actually means in the everyday use of the sampled Twitter users.

Findings are as follows. Material inequalities strongly influence users' visibility on social media. Furthermore, material and institutional constraints limit the repertoire available to users when speaking of 'gender equality' (or anything else, for that matters). This notwithstanding, users retain agency in using the options that are available to them for the achievement of their objectives. In the everyday use of the sampled users, gender equality emerges as a rather contested concept, with a strong tension between a 'neoliberal' understanding of equality as instrumental to economic growth and a 'politicized' understanding of equality as a fundamental value worth pursuing for its own sake. In this contestation, 'Europe' emerges as a space where equality matters for market-based reasons. At the national level, the picture is more mixed and open to 'politicized' understandings of equality.

In light of the above, I cautiously advance the following suggestions for policymakers and professions in the field of communications as related to gender equality. Firstly, I suggest taking into consideration the need to strike a balance between online presence and offline advocacy, possibly privileging the latter over the former. Secondly, I suggest serious reflection on the actual effectiveness of market-based arguments for equality.

Key issues at stake

The first key issue identified in the research here summarized is that visibility on Twitter and other social media platforms is unequally distributed in a way that does not favor political content in general and progressive political content in particular. Furthermore, visibility is unequally distributed in favor of those that have material resources (e.g. a press office) and symbolic capital (e.g. recognizability).

In light of the above, it is perhaps wise to question the extent to which equality advocacy can rely on social media. In the case of gender equality institutions, it might be necessary to re-think

the actual value of so-called ‘engagement’ on social media and possibly shift at least some resources away from online campaigning and towards other forms of political communication. In the case of highly visible political figures, taking into consideration the interplay of social media with mainstream media might prove to be essential for the achievement of public visibility for gender equality narratives. In the case of grassroots groups and collectivities, acknowledging the limited reach of one’s own social media visibility is crucial to start devising alternative strategies of political communication, online as well as offline.

If the first problem at stake makes reference to the way in which messages about gender equality are distributed, the second problem at stake makes reference to the way in which gender equality is discussed. The research here summarized suggest that there is a tension between a ‘neoliberal’ and a ‘politicized’ vision of gender equality. The former seems to suggest that equality matters insofar as it contributes to economic growth, while the latter suggests that equality is worth pursuing for its own sake. The former is particularly common at the European level, especially among gender equality institutions and policy stakeholders. The latter is most commonly adopted by grassroots feminist groups and collectivities, especially at the national level.

‘Neoliberal’ arguments for equality enjoy broad popularity because they are believed to be forms of strategic communication. Allegedly, they serve the purpose of bringing to the table stakeholders that would not be interested in equality otherwise (e.g. corporations). While apparently sound, this reasoning proves to be rather fragile once put in practice. The persistence of gendered discrimination in the labor market (e.g. gender pay gap, glass ceilings, etc.) questions the extent to which speaking the language of corporations actually helps the pursuit of equality. A ‘neoliberal’ narrative that reduces gender equality to a labor market issue and women to workers might even be counterproductive, insofar as it overwhelmingly focuses on one aspect of gender inequality while leaving unaddressed a wide range of other factors that collectively contribute to the subordination of women in society. A ‘politicized’ narrative that tackles gender inequality as a systemic issue might be in this sense substantially more effective. Switching to a more politicized language for gender equality would also displace the centrality of the corporate world, with the advantage of centering women as political agents endowed with rights.

Suggestions and ways forward

Based on the above, the following suggestions emerge from the research here summarized:

Re-evaluate the role of social media campaigning for the purposes of gender equality advocacy, potentially shifting resources towards other forms of political communication.

To reiterate, social media are not spaces particularly prone to support arguments in favor of gender equality. Effective equality communication on social media requires a good deal of pre-existing material resources and symbolic capital as well as substantial efforts in the making. It is perhaps worth reconsidering the extent to which we as a society value social media engagement and possibly shift to other forms of engagement and political communication that privilege the offline realm. Possible questions to ask when going through this process are:

- How many people did we reach in our last social media? How does that compare to an imagined ‘global’ audience? How does that compare to how many people we can potentially reach with a similar campaign offline?
- How much did we invest in our last social media campaign? How does that compare to how much we would spend for a similar campaign offline?
- What value do we assign to social media engagement? Is this value justified by the relevance of social media engagement to the cause we are pursuing?
- Could we balance or political communication across platforms otherwise?

Re-consider the actual effectiveness of ‘neoliberal’ narratives of gender equality, possibly shifting at least part of the conversation towards more ‘politicized’ narratives.

Restating once again, ‘neoliberal’ narratives of gender equality are reductive, constraining, and potentially counterproductive. Gender equality is substantially wider than the labor market and women should be recognized political agency far beyond their role as potential or actual workers. In this sense, adopting more ‘politicized’ narratives of gender equality can unlock the possibility of tackling a much wider number of policy problems. Furthermore, these narratives have the non-negligible advantage of centering women as political subjects, displacing the currently dominant position of the business sector. Possible questions to ask through this process are:

- When did we start talking about gender equality in ‘neoliberal’ terms? Was there a different way of speaking of the issue before? Can there be a different way of speaking of the issue from now on?
- How effective have we been in getting the attention of those stakeholders who, supposedly, would not be interested in equality otherwise? Did they engage in equality conversations since we adopted their own language? Did they engage in equality work thereafter?
- What issues were left unaddressed since the widespread adoption of market-based justifications for equality? Is it possible to recover their relevance?

Concluding remarks and recommended sources

This document cannot do justice to the complexity of the issue at stake and aptly summarize the 350+ page dissertation on which it is based. To the extent possible, this brief attempts to make viable suggestions for policymakers and communication professionals in the field of gender equality, inviting them to question some of their assumptions and possibly rethink their approach to political communication. Rethinking the extent to which equality advocacy can rely on social media is crucial to devise more effective communication strategies. Rethinking the way in which gender equality is framed can prove to be an even more powerful catalyst for change.

Those interested in the propositions advanced in this summary and perhaps in implementing them in their daily practices might find further inspiration and more in-depth analysis of the processes here sketched in the full paper on which this policy brief is based (details below) as well as in this short and by no means exhaustive list of resources:

- Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Melbourne: Pearson.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cavaghan, R. (2017). Bridging rhetoric and practice: New perspectives on barriers to gendered change. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 38(1): 42-63.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2016.1198209>
- Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elomäki, A. (2015). The economic case for gender equality in the European Union: Selling gender equality to decision-makers and neoliberalism to women's organizations. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 22(3): 288–302.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815571142>
- Eschle, C., & Maiguashca, B. (2018). Theorising feminist organising in and against neoliberalism: Beyond co-optation and resistance? *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(1-2): 223-239. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818X15272520831120>
- Fuchs, C. (2013). *Social media: A critical introduction*. London: Sage.
- Hargittai, E., & Jennrich K. (2016). The online participation divide. In M. Lloyd & L. Friedland (Eds.), *The communication crisis in America and how to fix it* (pp. 199-213). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. New York, Verso Books.
- Trillò, T. (2018). Can the subaltern tweet? Reflections on Twitter as a space of appearance and inequality in accessing visibility. *Studies on Home and Community Science*, 11(2), 116-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09737189.2017.1420404>

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