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Research Article

The Progressive Gendering of the European Union's Economic Governance Architecture

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Abstract

This study shows the correlation between the European integration process and the progress of gender equality objectives. In particular, it focuses on the effectiveness of economic governance tools to enhance coordination between national policies towards gender equality. The research question pertains to whether the new architecture of economic governance aims to consolidate the market model or correct gender imbalances. This aspect leads us to explore the diverse tools of national monitoring displayed in the recently reinforced governance, particularly the fiscal discipline policy as a conditioning framework, the European Semester as the current significant instrument for coordinating national policies, and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its Social Scoreboard annex. The analysis confirms that the potential of governance instruments to enhance gender equality is underused. Meanwhile, these tools set out a policy focused on consolidating the market model of competitiveness and fiscal discipline, rather than tackling gender inequalities.

Keywords

Gender; EU; Governance; Social policy

From a global perspective, European Union (EU) integration presents the best record as a region in gender indicators related to human development (United Nations 2018) and sustainable development goals (United Nations 2019). Despite this first overview, multiple differences persist between men and women regarding economic independence, equal pay for equal work or participation in decision-making processes (Schmidt and Ständer 2019; European Commission 2019b, 2018a; Eurobarometer 2017). The Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017) highlights a slow rhythm of advance in the last decade and even backward movements in certain countries, which, at the same time, provides evidence of significant divergence within the EU. This fact leads to a question about correlation between the European integration process and progress of objectives regarding gender. Kronsell (2005) expressed that the European integration process both affirms and challenges the existing gender relations. Gender equality is deemed a founding aspect of the EU, as reflected in Article 8 of the Treaty of Functioning of the EU and Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The EU commitment to principles of gender equality has been progressively translated into strong contributions to the legal framework, particularly through the action of the European Court of Justice and the provision of directives. These legislative advances connect with the process of economic integration as gendering social policies is primarily focused on fostering the rights of working women in the European Single Market (Egan 1998). Moreover, European gender mainstreaming has attained other issues, thus responding to the idea that joint action taken in various policies is the only means to address gender inequality (European Commission 2015a; Cenzig, Schratzenstaller, Franceschelli and González 2019: 3). Despite its informal and soft character, gender mainstreaming has exerted a transformative impact on the EU gender policy. Furthermore, it has produced significant changes in gender equality policy compared with other EU policies (Jacquot 2015).

However, the subsidiarity of social policies has always strongly marked this process because the main competence on gender equality remains at the national level. Consequently, divergences among EU countries persist. To address this difficulty, we add the traditional submission of social objectives to economic ones. The Lisbon Summit (European Commission 2000) and the Social Agenda (European Commission 2005) opened a new stage with the aim of modernising the social protection systems. Similarly, the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) set out new possibilities for promoting gender equality. Although the OMC aimed to combine national action plans and the initiatives of the Commission to promote cooperation (O'Connor 2005), progress in terms of gender equality coordination remains limited (Beveridge and Velluti 2008). This result is coherent with the failure of this system to reconcile national diversity with common European objectives (Zeitlin, Pochet and Magnusson 2005). These deficiencies remained even with the economic crisis boosts in 2008 and the display of a new architecture of multilevel relation and socioeconomic coordination (Bekker and Klosse 2013).

Focusing on analysing the new system of governance and the period of 2008–2019, and following Bakker's (1994) idea of the failure to acknowledge the gender consequences of macroeconomic policies, Klatzer (2013) concluded that EU macroeconomic policies are eroding gender equality and women empowerment. In particular, Klatzer (2013) emphasised how the new economic governance contributes to forming power structures that reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. Furthermore, O'Dwyer (2019) highlighted the overwhelming male dominance of expert committees and decision-making positions that define EU economic governance. She noted the manner in which the particularly gendered idea of expertise has served to legitimise the EU economic governance since the boost of the financial crisis. Likewise, Elomäki (2015) has shown how the focus on growth increased the pressures to reframe EU gender policy. According to Elomäki (2015), the analysis requested by the European Commission to its gender experts (Smith and Bettio 2008) outlined a new discourse

on gender equality as a factor for economic success (for example through increases in female participation in the labour market and subsequent contribution to GDP and women's inclusion in the fiscal system). From another angle, Walby (2018) added an interesting contribution on how increasing the EU power as a response to the crisis changes the subsidiarity boundaries and impacts gender. If this change reduces democratic capacity, then it diminishes the prospects for narrowing the gender gap.

Within this framework, this article's analysis examines whether the new economic governance instruments are 'gendered' or merely recommendations referring to gender within the broad growth model promoted. This study builds on the approach of Dawson (2018: 193) on questioning the nature of EU social intervention. The article poses a substantial issue at the core of the new governance: should EU social policy aim to condition the market or facilitate market integration? Other researchers stressed the idea of governance instruments that are intended to consolidate and reinforce the market model (Copeland and Daly 2018). In the same manner, we consider Elomäki's (2015) reasoning on a new market-oriented discourse that aims to understand gender equality as a productive investment rather than a worthwhile social objective that is potentially expensive. In this regard, the following research question is posed: are the new economic governance instruments 'market oriented' or 'market correcting' in terms of gender equality? To answer this, diverse tools of national monitoring displayed in the recently reinforced governance will be explored. First, the fiscal discipline policy as a conditioning framework will be addressed. Second, the European Semester as the current significant instrument for coordinating national policies will be examined. Lastly, a gender analysis will be conducted regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its annex Social Scoreboard.

From a methodological point of view, the article draws on relevant literature and used legislative and content analysis techniques to examine the EU's official position on gender in its governance instruments. Similarly, the study analysed the entire Council Recommendations to national governments under the new EU governance structure to assess the weight and nature of gender-related indications. Moreover, the study considered statistical data to verify and contextualise the correlation of such tools with the impact of gender equality.

FISCAL DISCIPLINE AS A CONDITIONING FRAMEWORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY

As a reaction to the crisis, the insertion of social policy coordination through the OMC into the Europe 2020 Strategy consolidated its subordination to macroeconomic objectives (Vanhercke 2013; Pochet and Degryse 2012, Degryse et al. 2013). As reported by the European Economic and Social Committee (2013), the gender dimension was not specifically addressed in any of the Europe 2020 objectives or flagship initiatives (European Commission 2010). Moreover, the practice of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance and the so-called Two-Pack and Six-Pack regulations and public expense rules denoted austerity measures that weakened the mechanisms for combating inequality (Hemerijck, Dräbing, Vis, Nelson, et al. 2013; Dhéret and Zuleeg 2010; Cotarelli 2012; Caritas 2015; Armstrong 2013; Alesina and Ardagna 2009). Even the International Monetary Fund (Blanchard 2012) and the European Commission (2013a), which had given their support for rigorous fiscal discipline, admitted with that consolidation measures were negatively affecting the ability of social systems to provide effective and appropriate policies. In particular such measures affected the poorest population segments who suffered the majority of consequences of social expenditure cuts. Notably, in the recent assessment of the 2020 Strategy, the European Commission (2019b: 193) admitted that an excessive focus was directed toward the cost-effectiveness of social protection on fiscal

consolidation as opposed to the role of social services as safety nets and their long-term positive economic returns. The statistical record provides evidence that, during the crisis, women were clearly a vulnerable group (McCracken, Jessoula, Lyberaki, Bartlett et al. 2013; European Commission 2018a).

In the same way, a consensus exists in the academic literature on how European fiscal discipline policies are particularly detrimental for women. For instance, Klatzer (2013) highlights how the impact of reducing public services on women is common to EU and other adjustment programmes. The reduction of national public services to accomplish fiscal discipline shifts the focus of care work to unpaid feminine work because of the gendered division of roles in the European society. Similarly, Walby (2018) stated that the fiscal is gendered because it concerns public expenditure on care services that influence the gender division of labour. The crisis has been gendered as fiscal consolidation has increased gender inequality. On the side of social organisations, diverse analysis (Pavanelli 2018; Gender and Development Network 2018; Donald and Lusiani 2017) have demonstrated that a reduction of public expenditure has economic, political and human rights costs, which are disproportionately shouldered by women. This was particularly highlighted by a report provided at the beginning of the crisis by the Women's Lobby (2012). This analysis evaluates the main effects of the crisis on women and explores the causes of its negative impacts in the following areas: labour market, social services and social benefits, and funding for the promotion of women's rights. Cuts in public sector have also a drastic effect on the drop in the female employment rate (on average, approximately 70 per cent of public sector workers in the EU). As a result, the narrowing difference in gender gap during the crisis was due to the deterioration of employment, not to the improvement of women. In terms of social services, cutbacks in public care and health have led to gendered roles in traditional care, for example the reduction of childcare benefits, parental leave and other family benefits reduced income for women with care responsibilities. Furthermore, cuts in benefits and transfers especially affected women's income because they use public services more than men. Finally, in terms of funding for women's rights and gender equality, an elimination or reduction of gender equality institutions and a restriction of funding for social organisations defending women's rights were observed. Accordingly, social organisations have strongly demanded the reinforcement of gender equality dimension in EU budgeting to protect vital services for women from cuts, to strengthen democratic processes or to ensure no cuts in public funding for women's organisations (Women's Lobby 2012).

Certainly, a high potentiality exists for equality through the institutionalisation of gender balance in fiscal decisions. In light of this evidence, this study agrees with Bruff and Wöhl (2016: 88-89) that the result of applying the fiscal framework is a highly masculinised governance, which is focused on competitiveness and growth, and displaces the effects of the crisis on households. In this vein, Karamessini and Rubery (2014) gathered diverse contributions supporting the placement of gender equality at the centre of any progressive plan for excluding the crisis. Although EU institutions have examined these questions (European Parliament 2015), little real progress has occurred considering the academic analysis of the importance of gendering budget (O'Hagan and Klatzer 2018; Cenzig, Schratzenstaller, Franceschelli and González 2019). Post-crisis fiscal discipline situates women's interests as part of the social policy only rather than deeply entwined with economic policy, as argued by Cavaghan and O'Dwyer (2018: 103).

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER IN THE ENHANCEMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY

In examining the new economic governance architecture, we highlight the importance of the European Semester procedure launched by EU Regulation 1176/2011 as a key element in the progressive rebalancing of social and economic objectives (Bekker 2014: 6). Its initial function, as a means to monitor the objectives of economic governance, was to confirm the subordination of social cohesion to fiscal aims (Costamagna 2013). Some researchers argue the progressive incorporation of an increasing number of social references in the various phases of its procedure to defend the gradual 'socialisation' of this instrument (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018). However, Copeland and Daly (2018) noted the need to explore the content and sense of such social references to assess true socialisation. Furthermore, Dawson (2018: 192) reported that when social actors fight for a more socially conscious Semester, they do so in an institutional structure that tends to reduce social policy to its fiscal impact, thus inducing a 'displacement' of social policy.

Having these perspectives in mind, we assess the weight of gender equality in the European Semester procedure. First, we observe the Annual Growth Surveys (AGS) as the basis for endorsing annual EU and national level priorities by the European Commission and the European Council. Throughout the analysis of AGS from 2011 to 2019, as shown in Table 1, very few references to gender equality are identified. According to the facts described in the previous section, we include references that are clearly connected to gender equality, although this aspect is not expressly mentioned. Such is the case of the provision of affordable childcare as it directly influences women participation in the labour market. We can report an intensification and added clarity in the explicit use of gender equality terms in the priorities of the three most recent European Semesters, which show a promising tendency.

Table 1. Annual Growth Surveys priorities connected to gender equality

Year	EUROPEAN SEMESTER PRIORITIES — AGS
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> childcare facilities to promote the participation of second earners in the work force (no specific reference to women)
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> equalising the pensionable age between men and women
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> childcare facilities to promote the participation of second earners in the work force (no specific reference to women)
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addressing the impact of gender pay and activity gaps on women's pension affordable care services to increase the participation of women in the labour market
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promotion of childcare facilities (no specific reference to women)
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addressing gender pay gap improving the work–life balance (no specific reference to women) systems free of disincentives for second earners
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> care services and affordable childcare facilities decreasing care obligations frequently affecting women
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promoting work–life balance for gender equality ensuring access to quality childcare and early education taxation systems that do not penalise second earners providing suitable family leave and flexible working arrangements

Year	EUROPEAN SEMESTER PRIORITIES — AGS
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • formulating tax and policy incentives that aim to broaden the participation of women in the labour market • increased access to high-quality care services to ensure increased opportunities for women

Source: Elaborated by the author upon European Commission (2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013b, 2014, 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2018b, 2019c)

Given the general characteristics of these priorities, the manner in which they are concretised in the Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) provided to national governments is worthy of assessment. Following Bekker's approach (2014: 8), all CSRs given from 2011 to 2019 have been carefully analysed to identify explicit references to women or to policies directly connected with gender equality. Over 1,000 recommendations given during this period to diverse member states were examined, with most of them containing indications for macroeconomic balance and labour market implementation. However, social aspects have little weight as per the already mentioned subsidiarity and prominence of economic objectives. For this analysis, general recommendations referred to employment for vulnerable groups (mainly directed to migrants and people at risk of poverty) were not considered. The search was restricted to those recommendations that expressly mention women or to those that are intrinsically connected to gender equality. In this sense, citations to 'second earners' and 'family care' as the feminisation of both roles were noted. Consequently, CSRs in this domain were systematised into the following categories:

- Equality in the labour market: the general recommendations that refer to increasing the labour market participation of women, reducing the gender pay gap, and removing obstacles for equality.
- Affordable childcare: CSRs that encourage women to participate in the labour market through affordable quality childcare facilities. Few recent mentions to long-term care are included in this section as they respond to the female role of family carers.
- Pensions: recommendations regarding the harmonisation of the statutory retirement age between men and women and equitable pensions.
- Second earners: Recommendations in this category enhance participation in the labour market by reducing fiscal disincentives for second-income earners.
- Flexible work: CSRs about women's participation, particularly women wishing to re-enter the labour market, by promoting flexible working arrangements. The only recommendation reported on the flexible use of paternal leave (given to Estonia in 2017) is included in this section.

As per this classification, Table 2 summarises the area of the policy recommendation by country and year of reception.

Table 2. CSRs linked to gender equality received by country: European Semester year of reception

	Equality in the labour market	Affordable childcare	Equality in pension	Second-income earners	Flexible working
Austria	2011 2012 2013 2015 2018	2012 2013 2014 2015 2018 2019	2011 2012 2013 2014 2015	2012	
Bulgaria			2014		
Croatia			2014		

	Equality in the labour market	Affordable childcare	Equality in pension	Second-income earners	Flexible working
Czech Republic	2015 2016 2018	2011 2015 2019			2011
Estonia	2015 2016 2017 2018 2019	2015			2017
Germany				2013	
Hungary		2011 2013		2011	
Ireland	2016	2015 2016 2017 2018			
Italy		2012 2013		2012 2013 2014	
Malta		2013			2013
Malta					2014
Netherlands					
Poland	2017	2011 2014			
Romania			2013 2016	2017	
Slovakia		2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018			
Spain		2016 2017 2018			
United Kingdom		2015 2016			

Source: Elaborated by the author upon European Commission (2020)

Despite the importance of including CSRs with reference to gender equality, we highlight their small weight in relation to EU priorities (below six per cent of the total), with the majority of CSRs dedicated to fiscal discipline, labour market and competitiveness. This number of recommendations is directed to only 16 countries out of 28 EU members. However, such data do not indicate that the performance of other countries in these areas is good. A proof of this claim is the record of 'bad performers' in the gender pay gap given by the Social Protection Committee (European Commission 2018c), which indicates that the distribution of CSRs is not fully coherent with national scenarios. The analysis also provides evidence of the most repeated recommendation (33 times) in terms of years and countries: the requirement for implementing affordable childcare (11 countries out of 17 receive this recommendation). This requirement is not only connected to women's participation in the labour market but also to the ageing society and the need to support new births. It is followed by general recommendations (15) given to national governments to increase equality in the labour market. In this case, the recommendations are concentrated in only five countries. The same is true for the category 'second earners'. Only four countries received recommendations in other categories.

Such analysis should be contrasted from the perspective introduced by Dawson (2018), which considers not only the number of CSRs regarding social aspects (in this case, connected with gender) but also the 'nature' of such interventions. In this vein, whether they are conditioning the market or, on the contrary, aiming to facilitate market competitiveness should be considered. In this regard, this study builds on the approach of Copeland and Daly (2018) when classifying CSRs as 'market correcting' (i.e. CSRs consider the issue as a problem that requires increased state engagement despite being involved with market-distorting elements), 'market making' (i.e. reducing barriers to market competition or regulating the labour market) or 'mixed' (i.e. enhancing labour market participation and recommending services or reorganisation for this purpose at the same time). According to this

classification, Copeland and Daly established as typical cases of 'mixed' CSRs those that refer, precisely, to women's access to the labour market. In these recommendations, we identify an element of social protection, but this is secured through labour market participation. They are classified as 'mixed' because they designate a supportive role to the state in terms of enabling women to gain access to the labour market.

We can refine our previous categorisation of CSRs with potential gender impacts as per the Copeland and Daly (2018) classification. As such, 'mixed' are considered those CSRs that pertain to equality in the labour market, affordable childcare, second-income earners and flexible work. Only such recommendations that pertain to equality in pensions could be considered 'market correcting'. They account for 11 per cent of the total CSRs presented in Tables 1 and 2 and represent 0.01 per cent of the total CSRs obtained within the observed period. Such analysis is coherent with Dawson's (2018) contribution on the 'growth-friendly' reading of social policy that can be observed in CSRs. This also coincides with Elomäki's (2015) argument on the discourse of market-oriented gender equality. The prominence of market and its flexibility and competitiveness in most CSRs in relation to women provide evidence of this rationale. O'Dwyer (2018) argued that women are considered a buffer workforce that can enter the market with overall flexibility. Moreover, other questions related to the singularities and requirements of women, such as pay gap, discrimination at work, or participation in decision making, are minimised or silenced. We agree with the concept of 'strategic silences' used by O'Dwyer (2018), and previously by Bakker (1994), to emphasise those aspects. Such omissions represent the lack of real engagement of the European Semester with gender impact and confirm the gender-blind model of economic governance.

This confirms that, as argued by the Economic and Social Committee (2013), the gender dimension should be systematically incorporated in the European Semester and subsequent National Reform Plans (NRPs). However, we insist on the requirement for an incorporation not directed to legitimise the economic model, hiding the feminist criticism on EU economic policy (Elomäki 2015). Therefore, underlining the effectiveness of the process of giving recommendations and supervision itself is necessary. CSRs that call on member states to adjust their NRP should consider the principle of gender equality and this should be followed through to ensure that such recommendations are practiced. The fact that one third of countries receive four times the same recommendations provide an insight into the difficulties of enforcing national governments to change their policy. Similarly, the follow-up of the observance of CSRs by national governments presents important limitations. Although recommendations regarding fiscal policy contain numbered objectives, those referenced to gender equality (and social aspects as a whole) are general exhortations to national governments without precise targets (Aldici and Gros 2014: 18). This difference provides national governments with broad discretion in implementing the suggested measures (Bekker and Klose 2013). The Joint Employment Reports, along with the Annual Growth Surveys of the European Semesters, provide an excessively general evaluation of the implementation of CSRs by country, for example 'Portugal announced that it will put in place in 2019 a guarantee of early childhood education' (European Commission 2017b). No quantification of the progress is carried out except for those referring to the gender pay gap. On the one hand, no control or distinction regarding the time of compliance is specified. On the other hand, most countries receiving CSRs are not recognised as having developed any changes in the manner required (European Commission 2018a, 2018c). We agree with Zeitlin (2014: 65) on the need of an integrated perspective of national reforms and in-depth reviews that incorporate social impact assessment. In fact, the European Semester provides the European Commission with strong legal capabilities in terms of surveillance and coercion to lead changes toward gender equality in a more binding manner than the former OMC (Costamagna 2013: 22).

However, to date, this procedure is under-used in the pursuit of social objectives as widely demanded by social organisations, including Women's Lobby (European Semester Alliance 2015). Recently, the European Commission (2019b) seems to echo these demands. The 2020 Strategy evaluation signals that the European Semester should promote increased coherence between social and economic priorities to save the risk of social recommendations being undermined by macroeconomic priorities. Translating these aspirations into the feminist view, the European Semester should both include gender recommendations in relation to women's participation in the labour market and reflect the singularities, suffering, and needs of women (O'Dwyer 2018).

CONTRIBUTION OF THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS AND SOCIAL SCOREBOARD TO THE ASSESSMENT OF NATIONAL PROGRESS IN GENDER EQUALITY

Given the abovementioned limitations of the European Semester, this section examines the potential contribution to gender equality of the last elements integrated into the economic governance architecture. These instruments are contextualised into the reflection on the social dimension of the economic and monetary union after the impact of austerity in citizen disaffection (Juncker 2014; European Commission 2017c). The European Pillar of Social Rights has emerged as a response to lead the EU toward a 'social triple A' and to avoid social fragmentation and social dumping in Europe (European Commission 2017d). The principles of EPSR, particularly regarding gender equality, were present in the *acquis* of the Union. However, with this declaration, they are reaffirmed and connected to other international recognitions and aims notably with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The EPSR has a remarkable line-up of gender-related questions. Chapter I is dedicated to equal opportunities and access to the labour market, including Principle 2, which is devoted to gender equality. The principle settles that the equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas. Both reserve the right to equal pay for work of equal value. Chapter II contains specific mentions of women in terms of fair working conditions. In particular, Principle 6 proposes that workers have the right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living. In the same light, Principle 9 focuses on work-life balance and recognises that parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements, and access to care services. Moreover, Principle 6 argues that women and men should have equal access to special leaves to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use such leaves in a balanced manner. Chapter III on equality is significant for social protection and inclusion because of the perceived impact of the austerity and cutbacks in social protection on women. Within this chapter, we highlight the most transcendent principles for women as per the previously indicated social deficits. Thus, we identify Principle 15 on old-age income and pensions that specifies that women and men shall have equal opportunities to acquire pension rights. Equally, Principle 11 on childcare and support to children provides that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.

It is noteworthy that the 'Social Scoreboard' accompanies the EPSR to monitor its implementation in EU countries. In this manner, the EPSR feeds into the European Semester, thus completing the new governance structure. This set of indicators emerges to measure the social and employment performance of member states regarding the 20 EPSR principles and rights in an objective manner that is understandable to citizens. Furthermore, it aims to assess the social progress of the EU and enables comparison and analysis for decision-making (European Commission 2017e). For this tool to be effective, defining the constructs to be measured and how they are monitored is essential. Concretely, the Scoreboard is composed of 14

headline indicators and 21 secondary indicators classified in 12 areas to measure the trends and performances of European social progress. These expanded indicators were collected in an online tool (European Commission 2019e), which remains open to study and comparison to facilitate policy recommendations. Sabato and Corti (2018) criticised the lack of the relationship between the 35 Scoreboard indicators and 20 EPSR rights and argued that certain principles and rights are not monitored (i.e. Principles 7, 8 and 12). Among principles selected as primarily linked to gender equality, we observed the absence of full coherence, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Principles of EPSR related to gender equality and its correspondence with Social Scoreboard indicators

EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS PRINCIPLES	SOCIAL SCOREBOARD INDICATORS
Principle 2: Gender equality at work	Gender employment gap (percentage points) Gender gap in part-time employment (percentage points)
Principle 6: Equal wages	Gender pay gap in unadjusted form (% of average gross hourly earnings by men)
Principle 9: Work–life balance	
Principle 11: Equal pensions	
Principle 15: Affordable childcare	Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare %

Source: Elaborated by the author upon European Commission (2017d, 2019d)

All areas monitored, except areas 3 (Inequality and upward mobility) and 5 (Youth), include at least one indicator with gender disaggregation. Several areas, such as the impact of social transfers except for pensions on poverty reduction, are essential to gendered policy planning. However, the study agrees with the European Commission (2019b: 193) in terms of defining targets and indicators in the post-2020 Strategy and that a better disaggregation by sex and increased attention to the evolution of indicators would be desirable.

Recognising the importance of these principles and monitoring, the EPSR remains a mere declaration of rights. Therefore, we question its potential to influence the EU macroeconomic policies toward gender equality. The Communication establishing the Pillar confirms that its observance is a joint responsibility as most of the instruments necessary for compliance with its principles are in the hands of the national, regional and local authorities, as well as of social partners. In particular, the EU and the European Commission contribute to the development of recognised rights by establishing ‘the framework’ and considering national circumstances. Previously, researchers expressly stated how member states or social partners display primary or exclusive competences in certain matters intrinsic to the Pillar, such as social protection, education, health care or labour law in terms of operating the principle of subsidiarity. Because of this multilevel governance structure, the European Commission (2017d: 7) assumed that, on many occasions, ‘the main problem is not the recognition of rights but rather the effective application’.

In the same vein, Cavaghan and O’Dwyer (2018: 104-105) stressed the lack of binding power. In fact, the rights of the Pillar are considered objectives without a legal standing, and governments and markets pay excess attention to the macroeconomic imbalance indicator than to the Social Scoreboard. In this manner, the EU is addressing social goals through aspirational objectives without legal enforcement despite being named ‘rights’. Cavaghan and O’Dwyer (2018) underlined how such an imbalance reflects a broader asymmetry within European Integration as it favours market liberalisation over market correction and social regulation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study asked whether new economic governance instruments are 'market oriented' or 'market correcting' in relation to gender equality. The analysis confirms the current lack of engagement of economic governance with in-depth transformation toward gender equality. The governance instruments deployed set out a gender policy focused on consolidating the market model of competitiveness and fiscal discipline, rather than tackling gender inequalities. Regarding the fiscal framework, the new architecture has repeated the mistake of subordinating gender equality to economic aims and concretely to fiscal balance requirements, which has led to strong negative impacts. Similarly, it was observed that the potential of the European Semester to enhance multilevel coordination toward gender equality has been underused to date. The correspondence of gender-related recommendations given to national governments is not fully coherent with national situation in terms of gender equality. Moreover, no clear or quantified objectives are given and monitored. What is even more significant is the absolute predominance of recommendations on women's participation in the labour market, which coincides with the market focus on promoting flexibility and competitiveness while omitting other inequalities and demands of women. Finally, the European Pillar of Social Rights confirms the same tendency, as a mere declaration of rights without a binding effect. Its Social Scoreboard annex is limited to providing statistical records without full integration into the cycle of the European Semester to guide the definition of policies.

The persistence of gender inequality in the EU requires the initiative that the traditional commitment of gendering European policies should be decisively extended to economic governance. Moreover, room for improvement exists for the gender-focused implementation of these instruments. A few examples of proposals in this vein are: the gendering of the EU fiscal decisions and budget, full integration of gender indicators of the Social Scoreboard into the cycle of the European Semester to guide the definition of policies, introduction of market-correcting CSRs and incorporation of binding instruments into gender objectives in the case of non-compliance of national governments. Nevertheless, these proposals, along with many others launched by diverse social organisations and researchers, will be insufficient when used to consolidate or even legitimise the current economic framework. Modifying this architecture requires not only increasing the number of mentions and recommendations in relation to women in EU instruments and policy papers but changing the type of those mentions and recommendations. A feminist view of the EU economic governance requires displacing the market-first approach and placing gender justice at its centre. The negative effect of the current framework on women vulnerability during the previous financial crisis can stimulate the avoidance of making the same mistake. Evidently, women are, once more, suffering from the majority of the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.

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