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### Power and Gender: Policy Frames on Gender Inequality in Politics in the Netherlands and Spain

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# **Power and Gender: Policy Frames on Gender Inequality in Politics in the Netherlands and Spain**

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*This article studies a potential barrier for women in political decision-making: the way in which policy documents frame the concept of power. Our study covers a selection of Dutch and Spanish policy documents on the issue of women in political decision-making. Drawing on Steven Lukes, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault, we examine what policy actors say about the concept of power and we analyze existing power mechanisms in the text, even when the concept of power or the power relations between the sexes is not explicitly discussed. Policy documents do not really discuss power, but yet they (implicitly) accept and reproduce existing power relations between the sexes. This lack of problematization of existing power relations might present an important discursive barrier for women to positions of decision-making.*

**KEYWORDS** *power, gender, political decision-making, gender equality policies, frame analysis, Netherlands, Spain*

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## INTRODUCTION

The prevailing gender inequalities in politics have been on the agenda for over 25 years. Arguments on gender equality, women's interests, or the gendered character of needs, and, to a lesser extent, the quality of political decision-making and policies or the need for female role models fed claims for equal representation of women in politics (Lister 1997; Sawyer 2000). Theory building on the relationship between the concepts of citizenship, democracy, and representation also supported those claims for equal representation (Collin 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2000). Though this literature underlines the need to go beyond the mere numbers to come to a reconsideration and sharing of power, it pays little attention to this issue in the end, as if the reconsideration of power would come by itself.

Feminist studies reflecting on power can particularly be found in the 1970s, 1980s, and the early 1990s. Examples are political theorists like Nancy Hartsock (1983) and Nancy Fraser (1989, 1993) who studied power as a concept. They discussed the notion of power as a resource that needed to be more equally distributed (Okin 1989), as related to domination (Young 1990) through a dyadic relation in which women are subordinate to men (Mackinnon 1987), or as a subordination that is maintained through cultural norms and social structures and practices (Fraser 1993). Most feminist work on power has generally embraced the notion of *power to* as opposed to that of *power over* (see Allen 1999), and some scholars have developed an empowerment-based conception of power as a capacity for individual and collective transformation (Wartenberg 1990). Finally, a great part of feminist reflection on power has been inspired by Michel Foucault, generating a variety of critical analyses of his work on power (Fraser 1989; Benhabib 1992), or employing Foucault's theory to explore how the subject of feminism is produced and how it is simultaneously subjected to power structures (Butler 1990). Within political science, research on barriers for women to positions of political decision-making or power has been of a more technical nature. It has focused on the present barriers, especially with regards to electoral politics, such as electoral systems, party systems, quotas, and electoral and nomination procedures (Ballington and Karam 2002; Dahlerup 2006; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Matland and Montgomery 2003; Rule and Zimmerman 1994), or with regards to women in state structures (Bergqvist et al. 1999; Lovenduski 2005; Stetson and Mazur 1995; Watson 1990).

This article examines a particular potential barrier for women on their way to power. Analyzing policy documents on the issue of gender inequality in politics, we study how, and to what extent, political power is framed. The hypothesis is that policy documents establish the guidelines for policy initiatives. They contain explicit or hidden reflections on power, so they can provide important leverage in efforts to remove gender-related barriers in the access to power. Although we do not aim to test the causal argument that

the policy documents' representations of power disempower women, we think that studying the underlying conceptualizations of power in policy documents on the issue of gender inequality in politics might reveal important discursive barriers to a gender-equal distribution of power. Our interest is twofold: our first level of analysis studies what political actors explicitly say about the concept of power in policy texts on gender inequality in politics. This examination reveals how political actors define power, not just when they act as individual agents but also when they produce policy documents through compromises between various actors. In our second level of analysis, we look for existing power mechanisms that emerge from reading the text even when the concept of power or power relations is not explicitly discussed in these policy documents. This second level entails a meta-analysis of power that reflects on what the absence of certain concepts or the silencing of certain actors in policy documents can tell us about the invisible power mechanisms that are at work in the sphere of politics.

Our analysis is supported by different theories of power. We draw mainly on Steven Lukes' (2005) and, to a lesser extent, Hannah Arendt's (1969) and Michel Foucault's (1995) theories, as they offer interesting insights for our interpretation of power and hegemony as reflected in policy documents on gender inequality in politics. We apply them to the cases of the Netherlands and Spain. These cases allow for an interesting comparison due to the fact that the Netherlands used to be a forerunner in equality policies while Spain was considered a latecomer to equality policies, but it seems to be setting new standards. Due to the differences in gender equality policies in the two cases, one would expect to find different representations of the concept of power in the analyzed policy documents. Yet we argue that this is not the case: not only do the Dutch and Spanish policy texts on gender inequality in politics not explicitly address the concept of power in an elaborate way, but the documents' unspoken message in both countries reveals a normalization and perpetuation of existing power inequalities between women and men in the political sphere. Our argument is developed in four sections. First, we discuss theoretical conceptualizations of power and how we can approach them using critical frame analysis. In our second section, we sketch the context of the two cases, the Netherlands and Spain. In the third, we study the conceptualization of power in policy texts of the two countries. Last, we discuss our findings in order to more deeply reflect on the extent to which policy documents on gender inequality in politics consider power from a gendered perspective.

## THEORIZING POWER

Broadly speaking, power is defined as the ability to achieve something. In political science, it is usually thought of as a relationship that entails the

ability of someone to influence the behavior of others in a way they would not have chosen. Power can be described as the *power over* someone, bringing us to the classical relational definition in which A has power over B if s/he can get B to do something that B would otherwise not do. Mainstream political science has produced a variety of theories of power. Lukes' theory of power (2005) discusses three conflictual conceptions of *power over* someone that give more relevance to political actors' individual or joint agency. In the first conception, power is conceived as a conscious action that in some way influences the content of decisions. It presupposes a visible manifestation of power in a (hypothetical) political conflict over a given issue that is perceived as problematic in which all actors participate with their respective resources, needs, and proposals.

A less visible manifestation of power is Lukes' second conception, which consists of the power to set and control the political agenda not only by making decisions, but also by making nondecisions. Issues that would not benefit the values or interests of decision-makers are not placed on the agenda. These nondecisions prevent potential decisions from being made, which will have consequences for the issue at stake. For example, when politicians argue that quotas for women are not necessary because changes in gender roles will come "naturally," this nondecision affects women's chances to be present in political institutions. Lukes' even more invisible third conception of power consists of the ability to influence another by shaping what and/or how s/he thinks. Through this power, actors create a situation of inequality or conflict which is not perceived as a problem. The result of this exercise of political power is to legitimize, or present as socially acceptable, relations of inequality, such as those between women and men in the sphere of politics, to the point that these inequalities are no longer questioned and are not even perceived as social and policy problems. Both the second and third conceptions of power developed by Lukes can guide our analysis of the less visible aspects of power that are at work in the political process and that lead to the formulation of policy documents in ways that include or exclude particular policy actors and discourses.

Arendt's conceptualization is opposed to that of *power over*, as, for her, power is not a zero-sum game in which an actor relinquishes power to another; instead it is a capacity to act. Power, in Arendt's view, springs up whenever people act in concert for the purpose of discussing matters of public-political concern; a person has power because he or she is empowered by a group, thus this power emanates from the mutual action of a group (Arendt 1969, 1958, 1972; d'Entreves 2006). Sites of power are common actions coordinated through speech and persuasion. This is *power to*, meaning power as a capacity to act together for a common political goal rather than power as control over others. Arendt's vision emphasizes the agency that comes from collective action. Critics argue that this is a prescriptive rather than descriptive account, as Arendt relates how things

should be, not how they are. Nevertheless, precisely due to its normative character, Arendt's conceptualization is present in some of the policy documents about gender equality in political power that we selected. Her idea inspires transformative notions of political power that involve processes of collective and individual empowerment. Moreover, many feminist conceptions seem to follow Arendt in her notion of *power to*, recognizing it as a means to break through the dualism of being either powerless or powerful, which is thought to be unhelpfully combative and hierarchical (Squires 1999). Examples of Arendt's notion of *power to* can be found in policy documents that aim to empower women in politics through the strengthening of existing women's networks.

Foucault's theory of power is more oriented to the analysis of structures that influence individual action. The actors' agency is enabled, and at the same time constrained, by the existence of broader hegemonic discourses that may steer the actors' intentional shaping of an issue in unintended directions (see Bacchi 2009). Of Foucault's theory of power, his idea of "normalization" is particularly interesting for our analysis. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) discusses the power to normalize that is exercised not only by prisons but also by a variety of social mechanisms that produce different types of knowledge and reality (Foucault 1980). Power is exercised on other people's actions through incitation, persuasion, and lastly, constriction and prohibition. Through social mechanisms and practices, power has the effect of normalizing certain values, norms, relations, and behaviors. Observing that which policy discourses consider as problematic tells us something about what is implicitly considered as the nonproblematic norm.<sup>1</sup> This understanding can help focus our analysis on invisible aspects of power that are reflected in the implicit and explicit representations of policy problems that appear in policy documents. This understanding suggests how the normalization of certain nonproblems or nonactions by particular subjects might reveal mechanisms of power that are hidden by the implicit legitimization offered by normalization processes. An example is the representation of the problem of gender inequality in politics as women's underrepresentation in political institutions rather than men's overrepresentation (Meier et al. 2005). Here, power mechanisms operate by implicitly legitimizing as the norm what is not considered to be a problem, i.e. men's overrepresentation, in this way implicitly reinstating the "legitimate" dominant status of male political power.

## CRITICAL FRAME ANALYSIS AND THE STUDY OF POWER

The conceptualization of power as something that is latent in what remains unproblematized brings our analysis closer to political approaches that focus on the discursive construction of policy problems. Bacchi's (1999) "What's

the Problem?" approach, in particular, suggests the idea that policy proposals, rather than referring to interpretations of the problem that exist prior to and outside of them, instead carry built-in problem representations. Policy discourses problematize certain issues at the same time as they leave others untouched, and in this way they offer a particular interpretation of what is and is not considered to be a problem. Bacchi gives the example of plans to increase women's representation in managerial positions that emphasize training programs for women and, in this way, create the problem as one of women's lack of training, rather than one of men's lack of training to let women enter (Bacchi 1999, 66). Asking what remains unproblematized in a given policy discourse can reveal power mechanisms that implicitly or explicitly represent certain groups as normative and other groups as problematic in relation to the group set as the norm. In the previous example, putting the responsibility of the problem of gender inequality in business on women risks leaving men's power in managerial positions unchallenged.

In Lukes and Foucault's conceptualizations, power mechanisms appear as latent in particular problem representations that maintain or reproduce unstated norms of dominance over excluded/subordinate groups and discourses, with the effect of perpetuating the power of the dominant ones. Power operates here by limiting, through policy discourses, those visions and voices that express different options for change and transformation, and by making it difficult to challenge existing normative groups and discourses. For instance, as Carol Bacchi (1999) argues, framing the problem of women's inequality as a lack of sameness with men (e.g. women will be equal when they will have the same work conditions as men) makes it difficult to challenge the appropriateness of the implied male criteria (male work conditions). Since the problem is represented as a "woman's problem, it does not touch on the existence of differences among women, thus leaving many issues and norms unquestioned" (Bacchi 1999, 69).

If power manifests itself in policy discourses, it should appear in some form in written policy texts on gender inequality in politics. But how to detect dimensions of power that are latent in policy discourses? To carry out our two-level analysis of both representations of power explicitly reflected in policy documents and of more invisible power mechanisms operating in the policy process we employ critical frame analysis methodology. Frame analysis originated in social movements theory (Snow and Benford 1992; 1988) and was further developed within the MAGEEQ research project ([www.mageeq.net](http://www.mageeq.net)), which incorporated insights from public policy (Bacchi 1999; Giddens 1984) and gender theory (Connell 1987; Verloo and Roggeband 1996; Walby 1997). Critical frame analysis aims to map the implicit or explicit interpretations of a policy problem that emerge in the representations that socio-political actors offer of the problem (of gender inequality in politics, in our case) and of the solutions to the latter. The key

concept is the frame (Goffmann 1974), an unintentional conceptual schema that filters our understanding of reality by driving our attention towards certain aspects of it (often influenced by our sociocultural bias), while at the same time making us neglect others.

Applied to policy discourses, a “policy frame” is defined as an “organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included” (Verloo 2005b, 20). Policy frames can make us problematize certain policy issues and leave others untouched. They are made up of different dimensions. The methodological tool elaborated by the MAGEEQ research team includes the dimensions of voice, diagnosis and prognosis, balance, roles in diagnosis and in prognosis, causes, means, legitimization of nonproblems and nonaction, and normativity (see Verloo 2007). We describe these dimensions further down in this section.

Although the literature on social movements’ theory is one of the references of our discursive approach, our focus differs because it is on actors’ intentional and unintentional framings. By contrast, scholars like McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow (1996) conceptualize frames merely as the intentional intervention of actors to shape reality in a conscious and strategic way. The concept of “framing” that they employ goes back to Snow’s original conception of framing as “conscious strategic effects by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow 1996, 6). In our view, even the most strategic frames may feature representations of a problem that reflect the meanings and interpretations that unintentionally and unconsciously emerge in the actors’ framing of the issue. Therefore, frames are not to be understood as totally intentional and conscious in representing the subject’s reality (Bacchi 2009). Our interest is in analyzing, on the one hand, what political actors explicitly say about power in policy discourses on gender inequality in politics, and, on the other hand, what implicit representations of power further emerge from policy texts through frame analysis.

Critical frame analysis is particularly suited to the study of power in policy discourses on gender inequality in politics because its detailed and in-depth analysis of the different dimensions a policy frame provide a method for detecting both visible and invisible dimensions of power. It helps us to identify the representation of the problem or its diagnosis, the solution to the problem, or its prognosis, and the balance between the two (for instance, by observing whether a policy document does not provide a particular problem representation with a solution). It further reveals what roles are attributed to the groups considered (who is considered to be the norm group and who the problematic group? Who is supposed to act to solve the problem, and who are the target groups of the proposed measures?). It also helps us identify the causes or roots of a problem, the means to solve it, and the

mechanisms that reproduce and/or solve the problem. Other dimensions of a policy frame enable us to analyze the less visible aspects of power, such as the legitimization of nonproblems (is something in the text considered to be a non-problem?) and the legitimization of nonaction (how is nonaction legitimized in the texts?), as well as the normativity that is expressed in a text (what is seen as ideal or preferred and what is seen as bad or detrimental?). The dimension of voice, i.e. who is given a voice to speak in the document or is referred to in a text, is important to assess which actors are excluded from the possibility of framing policy issues. Voice can be an indication of empowerment in the sense that it creates possibilities for actors to propose new understandings of reality and new norms that can open up different options and potentials (see Ferree et al. 2002; Kantola and Dahl 2005).

We will analyze these dimensions in a selection of Dutch and Spanish policy texts on gender inequality in politics dating from 1995, the year of the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing that represents a milestone in the governments' formal commitment towards gender equality, to 2004. The selection of texts primarily includes official documents declaring policies on gender equality that were produced by the main political and administrative institutions.<sup>2</sup> Texts include legislative texts, political programs, parliamentary debates, speeches, and declarations. A secondary source of analyzed texts was the written press, which was useful in giving a sense of the existing public debate on the issues. Finally, the selection included texts originating from within the feminist movement and gender experts. Selected policy documents undergo an in-depth analysis, the results of which are included in a systematic and detailed summary dubbed the "supertext,"<sup>3</sup> on the basis of which the different dimensions of a policy frame are mapped.

## WOMEN IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING: COMPARING THE NETHERLANDS AND SPAIN

### The Netherlands

The Netherlands is often cited as an example of a country with a stable, high number of women in politics. Having obtained political rights in 1919, the number of women in Parliament remained under 10 percent until the 1970s. By the middle of the 1980s it had risen to 20 percent and since the 1990s women make up slightly more than one-third of members of Parliament (MPs). During the 1990s, this inclusion of women was exceptional among European Union (EU) Member States, especially when excluding the Scandinavian countries. Except for the 1987 elections, the share of women senators has generally been slightly lower than that of their colleagues in Parliament. During the 2002 national and local elections, overshadowed by

the death of the flamboyant politician Pim Fortuyn, there was a slight backlash in the number of women, but figures remain stable on the whole.

Women's position in political decision-making has been less of an issue since the middle of the 1990s than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1972 elections the main actor of the Dutch women's movement, the non-governmental organization (NGO) *Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij*, first campaigned for more women in office (Oldersma 2005). For the next 20 years they encouraged parties, particularly the larger ones, to pay attention to the issue. Parties were also encouraged to do so for electoral considerations and by their own women's groups (Leyenaar 2004). Since the beginning of the 1990s most parties have measures in place to promote gender equality such as quotas or target figures for positions within the parties or for electoral lists. In 1992, the government published a position paper and initiated a project to promote women in politics and in public governance. It was followed by another position paper in 1996, but on the whole gender relations in political decision-making were no longer such a hot issue in the 1990s. In 1999 the dossier on women in politics and public governance was actually closed, and the issue was only addressed in broader plans for equal opportunity policies. Even the recurrent debate on a reform of the electoral system has not led to far-reaching debates on gender and politics.

Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, two issues related to women's position in political decision-making have been debated in Parliament. Both are highly interesting in terms of the way in which they go beyond the traditional strategies for tackling the issue of women in politics. The first debate concerned the replacement of MPs on maternity leave. A first bill passed the Second Chamber of Parliament in 1993, but was rejected by a majority of the First Chamber in 1994 because of the particularity and limits of the mandate of representatives. A new act had been adopted in June 2004, which led to an amendment to the Dutch Constitution in order to allow for the replacement of MPs on maternity leave. In this act, the grounds for replacement were extended from maternity to illness and medical treatment. In 2006 an act implemented this right for a maximum period of 16 weeks (which is the legal maternity leave duration).

The second debate was on the legitimacy of the conservative *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP) Christian Reformed Political Party to exclude women from regular membership and, hence, from access to power. The issue was extensively debated in 1990 on the occasion of the act meant to adopt the UN Women's Treaty. The issue received renewed attention in 1993 when the equal treatment act was under debate. This debate flared up again in 2000 through the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) subsequent critique of the Dutch government for not complying with the UN Women's Treaty. Complying would involve a sanctioning of the SGP and the Clara Wichmann Institute, a women's juridical NGO, started a procedure to prosecute the

SGP. At the end of 2007 the court ruled that the SGP discriminates against women by not allowing them access to political functions (the party accepts women as members since 2006). This ruling, however, did not exclude the party from receiving state subsidies.

## Spain

Spain offers a different context from the Netherlands as far as gender inequality in politics is concerned. It was an EU Member State with a rather low number of women active in political decision-making until the end of the 1990s. Though women obtained political rights in 1932, studies on their position in political decision-making generally start when the Francisco Franco regime came to an end in 1977 (Astelarra 1990). From then until the end of the 1980s women made up about 6 percent of the MPs in the national parliament. During the 1990s their number rose to 15 percent, reaching 28 percent in 2000, 36 percent in 2004, and 35.7 percent in 2008. Hence Spain has joined the ranks of states with a high number of women in elected political positions over the last years. The number of women remains lower in the Senate, making up 25 percent in the 2004 general elections and 29 percent in the 2008 general elections.

The position of women in political decision-making became an issue at the end of the 1980s. From then onwards debates, fed by left wing parties, mainly focused on quotas. In 1988 the Socialist Party (PSOE) launched a debate on quotas and approved a 25 percent minimum quota of women in party functions and on electoral lists. In reaction to this measure, the Leftist Party (IU) set a quota of 35 percent, and although the number of women elected did not rise to this set quota, it certainly rose (Lombardo 2008). In 1996 the Popular Party (PP) came to power and rejected quotas. The debate on quotas first entered the legislative arena in 1997 when the IU questioned the PP about their plans to guarantee a higher participation of women in politics. The third National Plan for Equal Opportunities (1997–2000) contained a section on “power and decision-making,” and several subsequent regional equality plans, as well as the fourth national one, contained similar sections.

The 1999 municipal and regional elections led to a quota debate within all parties. Women from the PSOE published articles and the party underlined its support for quotas, a position shared by the IU. The PP repeated their rejection but increased their own number of women candidates. The various parties maintained their positions in subsequent elections, and in the 2000 general elections parties used quotas as a campaign issue. In 2000, the PSOE submitted a bill proposal on egalitarian access to electoral positions, and other similar initiatives proposed jointly by the PSOE and IU and by a Mixed Group of Members of Parliament followed, but none of them were passed. In 2002 regions such as the Balears and Castilla-La Mancha approved bills on the introduction of quotas for electoral lists, and were taken to the Constitutional

Court by the conservative government (Bustelo et al. 2004). This led to a suspension on the part of the Spanish Constitutional Court of both quota laws. The same treatment was reserved to other regional bills introducing quotas for candidate lists, such as the Andalusia electoral parity law and the Basque equality law's provision on parity.

In March 2004 the PSOE won the general elections and created the first parity government, a decision that was maintained when the PSOE repeated its victory in the 2008 general elections. In March 2007 the Zapatero government approved the *Equality Law Between Women and Men* (Law 3/2007) that obliges political parties to respect a share of no more than 60 percent and no less than 40 percent of either sex on candidate lists in each group of 5 candidates. In June 2007, the Popular Party took this provision to the Spanish Constitutional Court with the accusation of unconstitutionality. However, the Constitutional Court, with its sentence of January 29, 2008, denied the accusation of unconstitutionality, giving its approval to the parity provision of the Spanish Equality Law.

This account of the different development of the issue of gender inequality in politics in the two selected cases provides the context from which the analyzed policy documents emerged. We would expect to find representations of the concept of power in the studied policy texts that would reflect this different development, with more elaborate conceptualizations of power in the Dutch context, which is more experienced in gender policies (in spite of the recent Spanish developments).

#### POWER IN DUTCH AND SPANISH POLICY TEXTS ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN POLITICS<sup>4</sup>

Our first level of analysis explores whether and how power is represented in Spanish and Dutch texts on gender inequality in politics (see Table 1 on the

**TABLE 1** First Level Analysis of Power in Dutch and Spanish Texts: Policy Frames on Power and Related Analytical Sources

| Sources                                      | Policy Frames   |
|--|---|
| MAGEEQ frame analysis                        | Numerical distribution of power (quotas, targets; Netherlands, Spain)           |
| MAGEEQ frame analysis                        | Equal access to power structures (Spain)  |
| MAGEEQ frame analysis                        | Obstacles to balanced distribution of power (Netherlands)                       |
| Arendt (power as capacity)                   | " <i>Power over</i> to come to <i>power to</i> (Spain, Netherlands)             |
| Arendt (power as capacity to act in concert) | Empowerment and <i>power to</i> (women's collective action; Spain)              |
| Lukes (second concept of power)              | Unequal gender power as nonproblem that requires nonaction (Spain, Netherlands) |

policy frames found on power). For this level, we draw upon Lukes' second concept, Arendt's *power to* (power as capacity to act in concert), and the MAGEEQ dimensions of diagnosis and prognosis, balance between the two, causes of the problems, means to solve the problem, mechanisms that reproduce and solve the problem, voice, legitimation of nonproblems and nonaction, and normativity.

Although we expected differences between the Dutch and Spanish texts, we did not find any fundamental ones. Spanish texts contain no explicit definition of power and references to it are occasional, abstract, and vague. Of the 15 Dutch texts studied, only 4 contain an explicit reference to power in connection with issues of gender equality. In general, the concept of power is employed in both countries as a synonym of the "realm of power," a concept that indicates elective and decision-making political positions. For instance, in most Dutch and Spanish government equality plans, the section of the text that refers to elective and decision-making political positions is named power and decision-making. Power appears to be mainly understood as the presence in higher functions of (political) decision-making, referring to women's participation in these institutions. Furthermore, the concept of power tends to be closely interconnected with that of equality, the latter being defined in a traditional liberal way of equal access to all spheres of society.<sup>5</sup> The inequality of women thus resides in the fact that women do not hold enough powerful positions as compared to men. Power, in this perspective, is reduced to a quantitative entity; it becomes a synonym for the number of women in political decision-making. Dutch policy documents, for instance underline that the problem is the "distribution of power,"<sup>6</sup> meaning that positions of political decision-making are not equally distributed among men and women. The problem is to be understood as an under-representation of women in positions of political decision-making. Given this numerical focus, power is also conceived as a zero-sum game: whatever power women will manage to achieve is power they have taken from men. This notion of a zero-sum game can be found in a Dutch text underlining that "a characteristic of the possession of power is that it is not easily nor voluntarily given away."<sup>7</sup>

Most policy discourses further seem to assume that, to be equal, women simply need to be integrated in power structures—the same structures that may actually be reproducing women's subordination. Achieving equality is not necessarily presented as a question of changing existing power structures but of offering women the possibility to enter them. Spanish texts frequently refer to the need to "promote equal access and participation of women in power and decision-making structures in all spheres."<sup>8</sup> In Spain, demands for sharing power and achieving a more balanced share of power come from actors belonging to the PSOE and IU in particular. Quotas for women in political institutions are part of the solutions proposed to overcome the obstacles that hinder women's access to power structures on

(numerically) equal terms with men. Whatever the obstacles may be, quotas are meant to bypass them.<sup>9</sup> The type of quotas that the PSOE, the main supporter of this measure, proposed requires that “candidatures of electoral lists will have a balanced presence of men and women so that their composition does not exceed 60 percent and is not lower than 40 percent of either sex in each group of 5 candidates.”<sup>10</sup>

A couple of Dutch policy texts focus more extensively on the obstacles themselves, distinguishing for instance between individual, structural, and cultural factors. The first refer to level of education, professional experience, available time, personal ambition, and motivation, but they are recognized as having become less important. Institutional factors are defined as those involving the distribution of power and refer to the gender bias contained in electoral systems or the selection criteria for candidates. Cultural factors refer to (mainly unwritten) rules, values, norms, and social practices, all of which are institutions influencing how much power women manage to gather. Notwithstanding, the more extensive focus on obstacles to a balanced distribution of power positions in the Dutch case, the solutions are similar to those presented in Spanish documents. A redistribution of power is thought not to arrive by itself but instead to need steering through stimulating measures such as quotas or target figures, as can be found in a Dutch gender impact assessment on the proposition for a new and mixed electoral system. The obstacles themselves are not tackled, existing structures and institutions (re)producing power relations are left untouched. In many cases no solution at all is suggested.

In some Spanish texts, the underlying suggestion is that, by sharing the “cake of power,” women might be able to construct a new world order.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the concept of power that emerges is one of *power over* in order to come to *power to*, in which the transformative potential of women sharing positions of decision-making is explicitly or implicitly stated. A Dutch paper on the position of women in decision-making, produced by a feminist scholar on behalf of the women’s policy machinery,<sup>12</sup> underlines not only the deficient distribution of power but also that of influence. Here, power is defined as the ability to decide on the organization of society, but this is stated without any further explanation. The text argues that there is both too little a quantitative and qualitative presence of women in decision-making, the qualitative referring to a lack of structural consideration of women’s issues or gendered interests and needs. No further explanation is provided for how the quantitative and the qualitative aspect of women’s representation relate to each other, or how more women in the realm of power would effect different decisions than those generally taken before as well as a reorganization of society. The author explicitly limits herself to the quantitative presence of women. Still, the fact that power can be the capacity to transform something, as it is understood by Arendt, is clearly underlined, even though it is not stated as such.

An alternative conceptualization of power in a more (normative) transformative sense emerges in a Basque plan.<sup>13</sup> The key concepts developed in this document are empowerment (and not the more limited liberal concept of equality) and *power to*.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the possibilities to expand women's potential are connected to who has the right to have a voice in the political debate. Gender relations are explicitly defined as power relations, although there is no mention of the patriarchal structures in which power relations are situated. Rather, power relations are depicted as occurring between two essentially different categories: women and men. Women's empowerment and increased autonomy are represented as possible solutions to the problem of gender inequalities in politics. Empowerment is explicitly connected to the importance of strengthening the women's movement and giving feminist actors voice in the political debate, which reflects Arendt's idea of power as capacity to act in concert.<sup>15</sup> The text introduces empowerment as a bottom-up concept that falls upon women's individual and collective responsibility. In spite of its progressive aspects, this discourse is not immune to the influence of the implicit male norm: while women's roles in the transformation of society are underlined in a way that holds women responsible, references to men's roles in this transformation are absent.

Power, in the Basque plan, is also conceived in Arendt's terms as capacity (*power to*) rather than control (*power over*), opening the way to the transformative potential of an alternative conceptualization of power. In this normative discourse, women's empowerment should depart from the concept of *power to*. The plan argues for the need to strengthen women's capacities, both at the individual and collective levels, in view of a "new model of leadership"<sup>16</sup> that would supposedly be more transformative. However, while women are supposed to exercise *power to* rather than *power over*, the text recognizes the presence of obstacles in the sense that it sees existing political structures as excessively hierarchical, making it difficult for women—or men—to exercise *power to*. Neither the concept of women's *power to* nor the way in which such a radical change of structures should occur is extensively developed in the text.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the limitations of the Basque document and the fact that it is an isolated case (it is one of the few references to power that we found in the selected Spanish texts on gender inequality in politics), it offers interesting insights on an alternative transformative concept of power similar to Arendt's. In the Basque text power is conceived as capacity that stems from both women's individual empowerment through training programs to improve their political skills and the strengthening of women's movements through training, promotion of exchanges, funds, and coordination programs. These measures lean towards promoting women's capacity to "act in concert" (Arendt 1972:151) with the common political purpose of achieving a more gender-equal society.

Lukes' second concept of power—setting and controlling the agenda by making nondecisions that would not benefit dominant groups—is reflected in most Dutch policy documents, as well as in the discourse of the Spanish PP. The latter shows a liberal emphasis on the individual, together with a denial of the problem of unequal power between the sexes. In this discourse, women's under-representation is not considered a problem in itself, because equal opportunities supposedly enable capable individuals (men and women) to compete for power and let the best individuals achieve power positions. Not only is unequal gender power (interpreted as women's under-representation) legitimized as a nonproblem, but nonaction is also the proposed solution.<sup>18</sup> The argument is that there is no need for legal intervention (i.e. quotas), since the set boundaries to political action are due to the will of individuals. Change will come naturally since men and women are equal in capacities.<sup>19</sup> Most Dutch documents, even those analyzing gendered obstacles to power, contain subtle legitimizations of nonaction by not formulating concrete suggestions to solve the depicted problem and by postponing concrete action.

Explicit references to male domination in politics are extremely rare in the analyzed texts' diagnosis of the problem of gender inequality in politics. In Spain, only 2 out of the 15 analyzed texts explicitly mentions men as part of the problem of women's under-representation, though this is never framed in that light. No Dutch text explicitly mentions men as part of the problem of women's under-representation. The closest to such a statement is the mention that institutional advantages for men have to be eliminated, thus recognizing gender-differentiated access to power. Still, the focus is on the design and impact of institutions, not on men. Policy documents underline the unequal distribution of power between the sexes, but focus on women; they lag behind, and they have to catch up. Issues of causality and responsibility never address men. Women hold the problem of not having much power and they should act to attain it.

This same idea appears in Spanish and Dutch texts' tendency to frame the problem of gender inequality in politics as women's under-representation rather than men's over-representation. The goal is a larger participation of women: heightening women's inflow, increasing their mobility, and preventing their exit. In this way, policy discourses legitimize male domination in political institutions as a nonproblem, and, as a result, implicitly reinstate the power of men in the political sphere. According to Lukes' third concept, power transpires precisely in its most invisible forms of ideological control, so that the discourse of the most powerful groups infiltrates in the definition of problems even when a particular group does not seem to use external pressure. In this case, men's political power is revealed not by its presence, but rather by its invisibility as a problem, and by what in Foucault's terms is named the normalization of its status as a nonproblem. This reflection brings us closer to our second level of analysis

of power mechanisms, which requires an interpretation of the absence of certain actors and concepts from the texts. Our question, then, is: what does the policy texts' absence of references to the concept of power and the silencing of the role of men tell us about power?

## HIDDEN DIMENSIONS OF POWER IN POLICY TEXTS ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN POLITICS

Since explicit references to power in the texts are extremely rare, we need a second level of analysis to help us grasp how power is at work even when it is not mentioned in the policy documents. We use frame analysis (MAGEEQ's dimensions mentioned in the previous section, particularly, voice, diagnosis, and prognosis) and draw upon Foucault and Lukes' second and third concepts here with the purpose of interpreting the unspoken or implicit messages of the text in this second level of analysis. Critical frame analysis can give us insights in the power mechanisms that are reflected in the absences and normalization processes that contribute to maintain the dominance of powerful groups and hegemonic discourses thanks to their "invisibility" in policy discourses. Frame analysis helps us focus on what are seen as the causes of the problem, on the roles that are explicitly or implicitly attributed to subjects in the texts, and on the voices (and discourses) that are included in, and excluded from, the framing of policy issues (see Table 2 for a summary of the invisible mechanisms of power that were identified).

The attribution of roles that emerges from the policy documents dilutes the relational and conflicting aspects of power. For example, the texts prefer holding abstract entities such as society or social structures responsible for

**TABLE 2** Second Level of Analysis of Power in Dutch and Spanish Texts: Invisible Mechanisms of Power and Related Analytical Sources

| Sources  | Invisible mechanisms of power  |
|--|--|
| Lukes (third concept of power)                                 | Male domination is a nonproblem: implicitly reinstates male power  |
| Foucault (normalization)                                       | Normalization of invisible male power in politics  |
| MAGEEQ frame analysis (roles and causes)                       | Nonrelational and nonconflictive representation of power   |
| MAGEEQ frame analysis (voice); Lukes (second concept of power) | Depoliticization of power: radical feminist voices do not reach agenda   |
| MAGEEQ frame analysis (voice); Lukes (second concept of power) | Strategic framing of the issue of inequality in politics by excluding feminist voices and issues in order to put the issue on the agenda         |
| Lukes (third concept of power)                                 | Taboo of male power over women: an issue that is unquestioned to the extent that it is neither formulated in the actor's mind nor openly debated |

causing problems rather than addressing specific subjects. Also, when the texts refer to particular groups, women are represented as the group that holds the problem of gender inequality, and they are sometimes made responsible for solving it by having to receive training in order to improve their qualifications for politics, or by becoming more self-confident. Men are hardly ever represented as subjects who may hold the problem of gender inequality in politics. Men are the implicit norm group that women are compared to and they hold the skills that women must attain in order to be equal in numbers; the texts thus implicitly legitimize the status of male power holders. They are never blamed for causing the problem, and are never called upon to act in order to solve it.

This leads us to consider that political power appears in the texts mainly represented as a nonrelational concept: it is an issue that seems to concern the subordinate group, i.e. women, but does not appear as based on a relation between A and B, where A stands for men and B for women. A is simply not considered. Rather than presenting a relation between a dominant group (men) and a subordinated group (women), texts provide a representation of power in which abstract entities are seen as causes of the problem, women are the group explicitly addressed, and men are the implicit norm but are neither considered part of the problem nor are they called upon to act. This nonrelational representation of power also contributes to provide a nonconflicting representation of the latter, as it hides the confrontational aspects of power that reside in the domination of one group over another.

The depoliticization of the concept of power could result not only from the presentation of gender inequality in politics as an issue that includes no political conflict and contestation, but also from the absence of more radical feminist voices from the policymaking process (Verloo 2005a). While they include the voice of policymakers, both the analyzed Spanish and Dutch policy documents rarely include voices of the feminist movement. This also means that potentially more radical conceptions of power are excluded from the debate about gender inequality in politics a priori, which could explain the nonconflicting representations of power that we found in the texts. The analysis of voice is closely related to Lukes' second notion of power, dealing with the extent to which actors and issues make it onto the agenda. Which actors make it there is significant both in terms of the actual power subjects have to define the agenda, and in terms of the voices speaking or mentioned in official documents as indicators of empowerment. The latter refers to the fact that if groups are mentioned in policy reports and their diagnosis is incorporated in the documents this indicates some kind of empowerment, as this is a recognition of their role in the process (although to be mentioned occasionally does not necessarily mean a consolidated victory). The *actual power* refers to the power to frame the terms of the debate and to include certain issues for discussion on the agenda. The scarce presence of, and

reference to, the feminist movement in the policy documents is then an indicator that their issues do not make it onto the political agenda and that the policymaking process does not empower them.

But even voices that are known to be feminist, such as Dutch feminist scholars, tend to silence feminist perspectives in their documents. Notwithstanding the fact that they address the causes of women's under-representation, the male norm is not directly tackled. Men tend not to be blamed and, even more telling, these documents remain vague on prognosis, leaving men out of this part. This vagueness cannot be attributed to the fact that the authors lack knowledge on the issue. Neither can the vagueness be awarded to the fact that the authors do not consider the imbalance of women in politics to be a real problem requiring a solution, as it could be assumed in policy documents provided by mainstream political actors. A potential explanation for the vagueness may be of a strategic nature. The policy documents produced by feminist scholars which have been analyzed in the setting of this project, have been written on behalf of public officials. Anticipating a potential lack of profound concern for the issue may have inspired the authors to produce a politically acceptable document by strategically framing the issue involved and leaving out feminist voices. To be heard implies reconciling oneself to the customs of the mainstream. Power to frame the terms of the debate and to make issues invisible can go so far as to involve voluntary censorship; feminist voices do not emerge as such, but as neutral expert voices instead.

Male power over women is revealed by its nonproblematization and through the major framing of the problem (and solution) as being women's under-representation in politics. The reasons behind this framing could be explained by Lukes' second and third concepts of power, as well as Foucault's notion of normalization. In light of the second concept, which deals with the actors' intentional intervention, it becomes clear that, given that male actors are the group with greater control over the agenda, they could tend to make non-decisions concerning gender inequalities in power because it is more convenient to the maintenance of their privileged position. Female actors who would question male power are excluded from the arena, particularly through the exclusion of most feminist voices from the debate.

With the help of Lukes' third concept, we can see that one of the levels at which power operates is a situation in which an issue remains unquestioned to the extent that it is not openly discussed in political debates or even formulated in the actors' minds. In this case, the male power over women seems to be an unspoken taboo. The problem of men's power is not explicitly formulated in the documents precisely because it is so dominant that it exercises hegemony over all discourses and the situation consequently does not appear problematic to the political actors involved. The power of the male group is made evident by the fact that they do not

even explicitly appear as the norm group, instead indirectly emerging from the problematization of women's "insufficiency." Still, men's presence as the invisible unstated norm suggests the unquestioned (even obvious) perpetuation of their power over the subordinated female subjects. In this sense, the maintenance of the male group's power is protected against possible changes through hegemonic discourses' continuous processes of normalization.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article we looked at the more explicit as well as the hidden dimensions of power found in policy documents on gender inequality in politics. Contrary to our expectations, notwithstanding the historical differences between these countries when it comes to the position of women in politics, Dutch and Spanish policy documents on gender inequality in politics do not differ profoundly with respect to the conceptualization of power.

Regarding the first level of our analysis, in which we mapped the different representations of power reflected in the policy documents on gender inequality in politics, we have to conclude that definitions of power are rare, vague, and limited. Only a small minority of the policy documents speak of power, and if they do, they tend to be brief on the issue. The concept of power is closely interconnected with a liberal understanding of equality, limiting the concept of power to a quantitative entity: the access to positions of political decision-making. Power, in this respect, is mainly considered to be a form of "control over," in this case positions of decision-making. Power is also seen as a zero-sum game: whatever certain actors have, others do not have it. Yet power is not seen as a relational concept; of the current relational definition of power only B (women) is addressed, not A (men). Isolated alternative conceptualizations of power as *power to*, containing a transformative potential, are grounded in the concept of individual and collective empowerment that we related to Arendt's notion of power as capacity to act together for a political purpose. But again the relational dimension of power is not addressed. Dutch and Spanish policy documents on the issue of gender inequality in politics do not address the issue of power, at least not in an elaborated way.

The second level of our analysis revealed that the studied policy documents contain numerous and telling unspoken dimensions of power. Theoretical conceptualizations of power, such as Lukes' second and third concepts of power together with Foucault's notion of normalization, were very helpful in understanding how power is at work in these policy documents. The selective construction of diagnosis and prognosis, the selective focus on problem holders and target groups, the legitimization of

nonaction, as well as the silencing of alternative or conflictual definitions of power relations we found in the policy documents confirm the existence of male hegemony. Male political power is revealed and confirmed by its invisibility as a problem, and by its normalization in the majority of the texts, even those of feminist actors. In sum, the Dutch and Spanish policy documents on the issue of gender inequality in politics might not mention power, but they speak for themselves with respect to the existing power relations and the prevailing conceptualization of these relations. They subscribe to and reproduce the existing imbalanced gender relations in political decision-making as the norm.

In this respect, although our argument was not oriented towards testing the existence of a causal link between representations of power and actual barriers to women in politics, we still suspect that the frames contained in the policy documents could form a barrier for women to positions of political decision-making. The policy documents do not tackle broader conceptualizations of power that would question the concept of gender, its construction, reproduction, and its power to structure social life. Furthermore, the presence of numerous policy documents on gender (in)equality in politics gives the impression that the issue is on the agenda and that no further action needs to be taken. While the goal of gender equality in politics is present, and the documents refer to the need to act, the suggested actions do not touch upon existing power relations and mechanisms.

Finally, as we noted in the introduction, there are strands of feminist political thought reflecting on the concept of power at a more theoretical level that have triggered debates about domination, empowerment, and capacity for transformation. However, it seems that such theoretical studies on power have not been particularly reflected in contemporary feminist political science, especially empirical political science, which tends to focus on women's political representation from a more technical angle. In the light of this analysis, we believe that the promotion of debates on the concept of power that would involve both feminist scholars from different social sciences fields as well as feminist activists and policymakers could produce a fruitful exchange and stimulate progress in thinking about power. This could in turn generate more comprehensive analyses of power, mixing both theoretical and technical approaches, which could eventually resonate in policy debates on gender inequality in politics.

## NOTES

1. This is not a new idea for feminist theory, as the latter has dedicated most of its efforts both in denouncing inequalities embedded in hierarchical gender roles that may appear as "normal" and be

perpetuated by existing structures of gender inequality, and in challenging the norm of dominant subjects on which this “normality” is based upon (see among others MacKinnon 1987).

2. For the list of analyzed texts, see Verloo (2007). The selection of documents was based on the construction of a time-line that identified key moments of debate among sociopolitical actors. Starting from these key moments, texts were added until they did not include any new substantial information.

3. Diametrically opposed to the concept of subtext, a “supertext” enables the hidden significance of a text to be made explicit according to the dimensions discussed.

4. The two following sections draw on research reports: Bustelo et al. (2004) and van Lamoen, Meier, and Jeuken (2004).

5. See, for instance, the minutes of the meeting of the Dutch Parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs and Employment consulting the Secretary of State on Social Affairs and Employment, A. Verstand, on the cabinet’s reaction (letter January 10, 2001) to the CEDAW’s reaction to the 2nd and 3rd national report, (28009-7), November 28, 2001.

6. See, for instance, the Dutch 1995 short term policy plan on equality policies.

7. See Leyenaar (1999).

8. The quotation is from the IV Plan for Equal Opportunities between women and men 2003–2006, but similar quotations can be found in all texts analyzed in the Spanish case.

9. Quotas as a means to promote women’s access to power structures can be found in the following Spanish policy texts: PSOE Equality Plan, April 26, 2002; Parliamentary debate on Women’s rights, April 22, 1997; Law proposal from November 16, 2001 on a reform of the electoral law 5/1985, June 19, 2002; Law 11/2002, June 27, 2002 for modifying the electoral law 5/1986, December 23rd Castilla-La Mancha; Debate on three law proposals on guaranteeing equality among men and women in their access to electoral positions, April 8, 2003; Electoral program of the PSOE 2004; Electoral program of the Leftist Party IU 2004.

10. The quotation is from the Law proposal from November 16, 2001 on a reform of the electoral law 5/1985, but it is similarly phrased in different policy documents from the PSOE and IU parties.

11. While the concept of sharing power can be found in several texts analysed from the left parties, the quotation of the “cake of power” comes from a Socialist female MP who states the following: “we women want to share the cake of power, not because we are crazy about it ... because we want to participate in the construction of a new world order” (PSOE speaker, Parliamentary debate on three law proposals on guaranteeing equality among men and women in their access to electoral positions, April 8, 2003).

12. See reference in endnote 7.

13. III Equality Plan Basque Country 1999–2000.

14. “Measures are oriented to achieving women’s empowerment in its double aspect: of acknowledging their capacities to exercise influence, power and leadership, and of promoting the effective exercise of influence, power and leadership. It is a matter of strengthening women’s social, economic and political position on the basis of the conception of ‘power to’ rather than ‘power over,’ which would imply the elimination of existing gender power relations” (III Equality Plan Basque Country 1999–2000).

15. “Measures proposed aim at raising society awareness of the importance of a more balanced participation of women and men in the different spheres and levels of decision-making, at better preparing women for their participation in the public sphere and at the strengthening of women’s associative movement” (III Equality Plan Basque Country 1999–2000).

16. III Equality Plan Basque Country 1999–2000, Action 2.1.3.2. page 13.

17. See quotations in endnotes 14 and 15.

18. “(...) the debate you [MPs proposing quotas] bring here today is an old debate (...). We defend a feminism of opportunities, not of imposition. (...) Against your quotas, we want responsibilities that respond to our efforts, capacity, and value. We do not want to be a number imposed in a list The PP MP continues by presenting the PP as a role model that has already solved the problem within the party by putting more women in decision-making positions. (PP speaker, Parliamentary debate on three law proposals on guaranteeing equality among men and women in their access to electoral positions, April 8, 2003).

19. “In my view such a strong interventionism of having to make parity by law must not exist, since this [equality] should be natural, given that we, men and women, are equal in dignity (...) and capacity, under equal conditions, to compete with men” (PP speaker, Parliamentary debate on Women’s rights, April 22, 1997).

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