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# The Gendered Leeway: Male Privilege, Internal and External Mandates, and Gender- Equality Policy Change

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The last few decades have witnessed important advances in the area of gender equality. In various parts of the world, gender mainstreaming is becoming an increasingly used tool in organizations of all kinds; gender-equality plans are followed by schools, workplaces, and governments; and when drafting new policy, legislators include guidelines to ensure that its gendered consequences are assessed. However, despite all these inroads of gender equality into mainstream politics, which have been made with the support of male-dominated decision-making bodies, individual male politicians are surprisingly absent as gender-equality advocates: pushing through gender-equality policies remains the primary responsibility of female politicians. For instance, research has shown that female legislators are more likely than their male colleagues to prioritize (e.g. Wängnerud, 2000) speak about (e.g. Bäck et al. 2014), introduce bills about (e.g., Carroll 2001, Swers and Larson 2005, Franceschet and Piscopo 2008), and vote for (e.g., Debus and Hansen 2014) issues related to gender. Even though gender equality issues are often associated with leftist parties, research has shown that these patterns persist in conservative parties as well (cf Celis & Childs, 2012).

This article tackles the question of why gender equality remains the primary responsibility of women politicians. Previous research has rarely focused on male legislators and the discrepancy between their fairly wide-spread support for gender equality on the one hand and the limited action as advocates of gender equality policy reform on the other hand. Rather, the literature has predominantly focused on the characteristics of female politicians that make them more prone than men to pursue an agenda of gender equality. Some accounts have emphasized women's personal motivations, which have their roots in the specific experiences that women have as women (Bacchi 2006; Wängnerud 2009). Bringing these experiences to

parliament, female legislators tend to focus on gender-equality issues to a larger extent than their male colleagues simply because they give more priority to these issues (Wängnerud 2000, Dodson 2006). Others have focused on the specific relationship that female legislators are said to have with their constituents. It has been suggested that women in parliament have a specific mandate in the sense that they feel a particular obligation or expectation to push for an agenda that benefits women as a group. This understanding of mandate goes beyond the formal mandate given to politicians from voters on election day as it also includes expectations put on female legislators from female activists (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008).

However, in a time when gender equality has become a symbol of modernity, and has positive connotations in public debate in most countries (Krook 2007), focusing increasingly on male politicians is warranted to better understand these gendered behavioral patterns in issues related to gender equality. As a consequence, this article seeks to add a new perspective to research on gender, legislative behavior and political representation by addressing the question of why male politicians, despite being advocates of advances in gender equality, are less likely than female politicians to act as drivers of gender-equality policy change. More specifically, to address the question, we draw together theories from the field of critical studies on men and masculinities, feminist institutionalism and from research on women's substantive representation to make the theoretical argument that there is a gendered leeway in politics. We argue that male politicians have more leeway than female politicians.

Specifically, we suggest that male politicians are less likely to be drivers of gender equality change simply because they, in contrast to their female colleagues, do not run the risk of losing political legitimacy for failing to adhere to gender-equality ideals—and while still retaining the chance of getting credit when doing so. In contrast to female politicians, male

politicians have the privilege of being less likely to be held accountable for not pushing through gender-equality reform proposals.

To develop this argument, we make a conceptual distinction between *internal* and *external* mandates. We suggest that these mandates, in a given institutional context with its specific norms and expectations about men and women, have gendered consequences. We illustrate this theoretical argument with an empirical case in which we would expect few and small differences between female and male politicians in their approaches to gender-equality issues, and thus would expect no gendered leeway: the self-labelled feminist Swedish Social Democratic Party. More specifically, we analyze a specific gender-equality reform process within the Swedish Social Democratic Party: The party's failure in 2005 to make the Swedish parental-leave benefit more gender-equal.

### **The Gendered Leeway: Theorizing Internal and External Mandates**

Within the literature on gender-equality policy and women's substantive representation, men's participation (or lack thereof) in furthering gender-equality issues has rarely been at the center of attention (for an exception, see Murray 2014). The theoretical focus is almost always on female political actors. However, as important as it is to understand why women pursue gender-equality issues to a greater extent than men, scholars should equally attempt to understand why relatively few male political actors do so. With the advances in the area of gender equality during the last decades, one could expect gender-equality issues to have become mainstream items on the political agenda that would attract the attention of male as well as female political actors. On the other hand, the perceived freedom to prioritize different issues in different situations is an important asset in a political career, and an asset that we can assume most politicians would safeguard, if they have it.

In an attempt to contribute to a new research agenda on men and politics, we make the theoretical argument that male politicians often refrain from pursuing progressive gender-equality issues because they have access to a leeway that female politicians largely lack: the flexibility to freely choose whether or not to advocate gender equality. To develop this argument, we distinguish between internal and external mandates. Internal mandates refer to the expectations politicians place on themselves to support certain issues and groups, and external mandates refer instead to an ascribed mandate in terms of expectations from others to support certain issues and groups. We are not here mainly concerned with the formal electoral mandate emanating from voters on Election Day. The mandates we look at here belong, instead, to the sphere of informal institutions, in the sense that although they are not formalized areas of responsibility, they constitute clear informal expectations and stipulate different rules of the game for men and women (c.f. Krook and Mackay 2011). Feminist institutionalism has revealed a gendered logic of appropriateness in political institutions (Chappell, 2006). Informal rules, norms and expectations constrain certain types of behavior while encouraging others, and the prescribed (and proscribed) behavior is intertwined with norms connected to femininity and masculinity. External mandates can thus be understood as manifestations of this gendered logic of appropriateness. They are communicated in day-to-day interactions with others active in the political sphere (i.e. party officials, group leaders, representatives of interest organizations) and there are informal sanctions for deviating from the expected behavior or from not assuming the expected area of responsibility.

Within the literature on women's substantive representation, it has been suggested that women in parliament, in addition to representing their political party, have a specific mandate

to address issues that benefit women as a group<sup>1</sup> (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008, see also Swers and Larson 2005). This additional mandate has its origin in women's historic underrepresentation in legislative bodies. As long as women are not equally represented, some ideas and perspectives are less likely to end up on the political agenda (Phillips 1995). This means that elected women often face a double bind. On the one hand, female legislators in most political systems are nominated by their political parties, so they need to be loyal to party gatekeepers to further their political career; on the other hand, they are likely to receive criticism from feminist activists (within their party and party grassroots, in women's organizations, etc.) if they do not give priority to "women's interests" (Miguel 2012). Thus, when there is a discrepancy between the political party's position on an issue and the position of female grass-roots activists, elected women may face a dilemma as to whether they should be loyal to the party or to women as a group (Zetterberg 2013).

This is not a claim that all women always will be subjected to exactly the same internal and external pressure. It can vary according to political context, party ideology, and between individual women politicians. Also conservative women politicians have to relate to expectations to act as women for women, although the ideological content of those expectations may be different from the expectations on leftist women (Celis and Childs 2012). However, the point is that an external mandate is ascribed to women by others. Women have to relate to these outside expectations whether they agree with them or not. Literature about mandate effects claims that many women who enter parliament feel an obligation to push for an agenda that benefits women (Swers and Larson 2005, Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). This argument is in line with the findings of Anzia and Berry (2011) that female politicians

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<sup>1</sup> This article does not address the much-discussed question of who defines women's interests. For a debate about this issue, see for instance Chappell and Hill (2006) and Htun and Weldon (2010).

internalize the expectations from (female) voters, women's movements, and their own political party, that elected female representatives should push for a political agenda that aims at leveling out gender inequalities (Childs 2002, 2001). We therefore propose that the mandate effect is, in fact, two-dimensional: It consists of both external expectations on female politicians to act on the behalf of women (i.e. an external mandate) and an internalization of these expectations, so that female politicians also feel a greater responsibility to act for women than male politicians do (i.e. an internal mandate).

Working for leveling out gender equalities thus becomes a necessary, albeit not sufficient, part of performing the representative role for women. Male politicians, on the other hand, are likely to be largely unaffected by both the external and the internal gender mandate; they are thus free from the double bind experienced by many female politicians. Since they embody the norm, it is not a necessity for male politicians to either push for "men's interests" or for gender issues in order to maintain legitimacy as politicians. The fact that male politicians are seen as the political norm has resulted in a number of analyses of women from the standpoint of their being a "different kind of politician." Although men have been examined in many empirical analyses of legislative behavior, they have usually served as a taken-for-granted backdrop rather than as the objects of gendered scrutiny (Bjarnegård 2013).

In this study, we focus on male politicians "as men". A gendered analysis is an analysis about power, and we argue that those who wield (political) power need to be explicitly analyzed. A critical study of men and masculinities is also relational in the sense that it relates the position of men to the position of women in order to chisel out gendered advantages (and disadvantages)—even when such advantages are not recognized or desired, but are instead seen as the normal state of things, that is, the norm (e.g., Carrigan et al. 1987; Hearn 2004).

We pay attention to one specific political advantage that the male gender is suggested to confer: the power to choose not to advocate gender equality. To understand how this advantage plays out politically, one must first consider the construction of masculinity in a context where gender equality is prioritized and, in principle, advocated by most political actors. Masculinity theories involve recognizing power structures and pointing to who is perceived as competent, who is listened to, who gets the final word, and so forth. Importantly, power structures exist among men as well. The concept of hegemony is often used to point to the fact that there are *hegemonic masculinities* that serve as societal ideals. Such ideals are powerful, not in the sense that all or even most men live up to them, but in the sense that they are something to strive toward (Hearn 2004). According to Gramsci, a hegemony has a direct political impact by pressing its definition on every situation, by involving the consent even of those being dominated, and by being constructed through a complex web of political actors, sanctioning the ideal to the extent that it is seldom questioned (Gramsci 1971). In Butler's words, the concept of hegemony "emphasizes the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power" (Butler 2000, 13–14). Hearn argues that the concept of hegemony is useful, but that we should focus on the hegemony of men's practices in order to highlight the social processes that have a hegemonic acceptance of the category of men and that consistently undervalue that which is feminine. At the same time, we must not forget that certain men and certain practices are the most powerful in setting agendas; and we should strive to describe how these taken-for-granted practices are, in fact, gendered (Hearn 2004).

At the same time as gender equality has been making large advances in many societies, several studies have also pointed to new masculinities that, if not hegemonic, are at least

possible—such as a child-oriented masculinity (Klinth 2002). These new orientations enable new courses of action for men in which it is not necessarily seen as “unmanly” to care for one’s children or to conduct activities that historically have been executed by women. The availability of such masculinity models should also make it more likely that male politicians engage in policy areas that traditionally have been prioritized by women. Arguably, however, the importance of these new masculinities should not be overestimated. While the fact that caring for children can now be reconciled with “feeling like a man” in many societies, this action still carries connotations that are primarily feminine and, as such, subordinate. A child-oriented masculinity, or the pursuit of “women’s issues,” is common in certain groups of men, but it can hardly be described as the societal ideal toward which most men strive.

Bekkengen’s study of the negotiations of Swedish couples regarding their use of parental leave illuminates the optional nature of a child-oriented masculinity in an interesting way. She demonstrates that while it is seen as possible and even desirable for men to take primary responsibility for the children for an extended period of time, it is seldom expected. When men choose to do so, they are met with gratitude. If they do stay at home with the children, they are doing work that is generally seen as less rewarding and having a lower status than their income-generating work. Women, on the other hand, do not perceive that they even have a choice in the same situation. They are clearly expected to stay at home for an extended period of time (the exact expected time of course varying across countries), and far from being met with gratitude for doing so, there are social sanctions if they do not stay at home. Despite advances in gender equality, childcare is still given a lower status than other forms of work; and it is expected of women while sometimes being carried out by “benevolent” men (Bekkengen 2002).

Transferring these ideas about a benevolent child-oriented masculinity, which is free from expectations, from the family to the political domain, we suggest that male politicians are not expected to take a primary responsibility for pursuing issues that traditionally have been pursued by women, such as gender-equality policies. Gender-equality issues are still not mainstream enough to be put on par with many other political issues and, as such, are seen as subordinate and belonging to a traditional women's domain. As a consequence, men who for some reason oppose gender-equality reforms are not likely to be severely criticized for their lack of support. There is no external mandate whereby men are generally expected to take responsibility for putting these issues on the political agenda. On the other hand, we suggest that those men who do push for gender-equality reforms when the political circumstances so allow are likely to be met with gratitude for even engaging in these issues. In line with the argument about internalization, we also expect that male politicians, simply because they do not have an external mandate, will not go through a process of internalizing these issues so that they themselves feel a responsibility to stand up for and prioritize these issues regardless of the political circumstances. While gender-equality issues tend to bind female politicians and circumscribe their room for maneuvering, the same issues only constitute an optional opportunity for male politicians.

Our theoretical argument with regards to the gendered leeway is thus that female politicians have an external gender mandate that their male colleagues lack, as women are expected to forward gender-equality reforms while men are not. Female politicians are blamed if they do *not* pursue "women's issues" while male politicians get credit if they *do*. Potentially, blame and credit may be given by a broad range of actors, depending on the research focus: politicians, constituents, and so forth. The research focus in this article is on the external mandates given to politicians by their colleagues, i.e. other politicians. The consequence of

external mandates is that women also internalize a personal mandate to represent women (i.e. an internal gender mandate) that men do not.

In the remainder of this article, we illustrate the theoretical argument by investigating the issue of parental leave in Sweden. Our illustrative analysis demonstrates that the same dissonance between political discourse and hegemonic masculinity exists in the top-level political sphere as it does during the negotiations around the kitchen-table. Male politicians have the privilege of a larger maneuvering room that enables them to speak within the gender-equality discourse without being delegitimized when they prioritize other issues. Female politicians are much less likely to view gender-equality issues as an issue among others; rather, it is an area that they are expected to cover (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008, Miguel 2012, Wängnerud 2000). They face blame if they do not fight for gender equality.

Importantly, the female politicians in our study also blame themselves if they feel that they cannot prioritize gender-equality issues.

## **Parental Leave and Gender Equality in the Swedish Social-Democratic Party**

Our illustrative case is situated in Sweden, a country that has, arguably, been the model country for gender-equality policies. Gender equality has been on the political agenda since the 1960s. The focus then changed from a sole focus on women's issues to also include the role of men and the unequal relationship between the sexes. At least rhetorically men as well as women were, early on, ascribed responsibility for gender equality. In the 1970s the Social-Democratic governments introduced a set of policies based on the then radical idea that women and men should be seen as both workers and carers. In 1974 Sweden, as the first country in the world, converted paid maternal leave into parental leave that could voluntarily

be shared by the parents. In the 1990s feminist issues came to the top of the political agenda and several political parties started talking about and supporting feminism. Even though individual men have been active participants in this development, women political actors outside and inside the formal political institutions have taken the main responsibility for furthering the feminist agenda (Wängnerud 2000).

The very fact that Sweden has come relatively far in creating policies explicitly directed toward decreasing structural inequalities between men and women makes it a suitable setting for our case. For example, Swedish fathers spend more time at home with their small children and have a greater chance of combining work life with family life than most fathers in the world. However, a third of employed Swedish women work part-time, while only a tenth of employed Swedish men do. Not surprisingly, mothers still take most of the paid parental leave and do a much larger share of unpaid work than fathers do. One of the most important gender-equality debates in Sweden thus concerns how to even out parental leave, childcare, and labor-market participation so that they are close to equally shared between mothers and fathers. One way to ascertain that fathers become more involved in the care of their children would be to individualize parental leave; that is, to tie parental benefits to the individual parent and not to the couple/family. Different terms such as “father’s quota,” “earmarking,” and “individualization” have been used to describe this phenomenon. Many Swedish feminists see individualized parental-leave policies as the key to promoting gender equality in general (Bergqvist 1999).

In 2005, a window of opportunity was opened for the individualization of parental leave. The Social Democrats were in power and the party had already declared itself as a feminist party in 2001 (Bergqvist et al. 2007). In 2002, with the support of the Left Party and the Green

Party, they had introduced a second earmarked month into the parental-leave system.<sup>2</sup>

Parental leave was continuously and frequently debated in media, often by influential societal actors who were either directly from or closely associated with the Social Democratic Party (e.g. the women's wing as well as youth wing of the party), which promoted legislation to increase fathers' share of the parental leave. In 2004, the central trade union *Landsorganisation* (LO), with close relations to the Social Democratic Party, decided to support an increased individualization. Altogether, there was strong pressure from gender-equality advocates both outside and inside the Social Democratic Party for a change toward individualization.

The debate about reforming parental leave peaked at the Social Democratic Party Congress in the fall of 2005. The purpose of the Congress was to decide on priorities for the party in the upcoming 2006 election campaign. For some time, it seemed that the party was about to support increased reservation of parental leave. Many Party Congress delegates defended more individualization and thought they could make the congress support a reform (Interview, Nalin Pekgul). The then-prime minister and leader of the Social Democrats, Göran Persson,

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<sup>2</sup> Since the possibility to share parental leave was introduced in 1974, gender-equality actors have demanded that at least a part of the time should be earmarked for the father. The first earmarked month, sometimes called the "daddy month," was introduced in 1994 by a center right government. Today, Swedish parental-leave legislation is generous both in terms of time (480 days per child) and reimbursement (80% of the parent's income up to a certain amount). It is also formally constructed in a gender-neutral way, allotting half the time to each parent. In practice, however, it is possible to transfer all but 60 days to one parent. The consequence of this practice is that in 2011, women used 76% of the child allowance days while men used the remaining 24%. In general, leftist parties have been in favor of more individualization, whereas the parties on the right have emphasized the right of parents to decide what suits their families. The question has, however, been debated by all parties.

thus received a lot of media attention when he, during the ongoing congress and before the congress debate of the parental leave issue, declared that there would be no more “quotas” in the parental leave legislation (Brors 2005). The executive committee of the party did not stand behind a reform and Persson made it clear that the official party line would not be changed during the congress. The proponents of a reform had to accept a compromise by slightly rewording the official party position to indicate that the party may be in favor of an increased individualization in the future (Interview, Nalin Pekgul). This decision was based on electoral concerns, as there was an upcoming election and the committee perceived the reform to be unpopular among the party’s core working-class voters (see also Bergqvist et al 2015). In the upcoming election the party subsequently lost power to a center-right coalition.

Considerable debate has thus taken place within the Social Democratic Party regarding this reform, with several actors taking up different positions. Because individualization had been specifically framed as furthering gender equality, the internal party debate is a suitable illustrative case for studying how external and internal gender-equality mandates play out differently even for female and male feminist politicians.

In order to highlight the different room of maneuver of the male and female politicians and to illustrate the presence and lack of external and internal gender mandates, we analyze the decisions and arguments made by crucial actors involved in the self-declared feminist Social Democratic Party, with particular focus on actors in the Government and the Party. We have based this illustrative analysis on thirteen in-depth interviews with high-level Social Democrats (seven men and six women), including former Social Democratic ministers who were central to the process on parental leave. The interviews lasted for about 40-80 minutes

and were recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded.<sup>3</sup> By making use of interviews, we can examine the underlying expectations that are connected to our theoretical argument. When respondents talk about what they expected of their colleagues, we classify this as external mandate. When respondents talk about what they feel obliged to assume responsibility for, why, and at what cost, this is seen as pertaining to internal mandates. In this analysis we put our main focus on those actors (male and female) who decided to oppose the reform at this particular point in time.<sup>4</sup> We analyze the actors' reasoning and motives as expressed by themselves in order to unveil their perceived external and internal mandates and whether a gendered leeway exists in this situation.

## **Analysis**

In order to illustrate our theoretical argument about the external and internal mandates of female politicians and the comparatively larger leeway of male politician, we first clarify what is implied by a politician's opposition to the parental-leave reform proposal in the Social Democratic Party in 2005. Opposition to this proposal does not constitute an overt opposition to gender equality in itself; rather, it indicates a prioritization of other issues that certain actors perceive to be more salient. We discuss to what extent opposition and support is gendered in itself. Second, we unveil the gender mandate given to women—both by others (external) and by themselves (internal). We demonstrate that this mandate is gendered in the expected way: Women are given a gender-equality mandate by those around them that men are generally not given; and women also tend to give themselves a stronger gender mandate than men do. Our

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<sup>3</sup> To facilitate a systematic analysis of the interview transcripts we used the software atlas.ti to code the interviews.

<sup>4</sup> We have shown elsewhere that the opponents to the reform are more likely to be found in the party leadership (Bergqvist et al 2015).

interviews with male politicians demonstrate that they do take political advantage of the leeway that is gendered in their favor, even if they do so unconsciously.

### **The pragmatic opposition**

Identifying the opposition to the parental-leave reform within the Social Democratic Party leadership was not a straightforward task, because in principle, it did not exist. Opposition to the issue was not ideological, but consisted of a pragmatic electoral concern and a failure to openly support the proposal. Different types of arguments were put forward: that the time close to the election was not right for the reform, that the reform would be a sort of betrayal to working-class women; that it would be too costly; or simply that there were other, more pressing issues that had to be prioritized (interview with Wanja Lundby-Wedin). There were thus other salient issues that, from a pragmatic political point of view, made it entirely feasible to decide not to prioritize this particular question at this particular point in time. Jan Larsson, the State Secretary under Prime Minister Göran Persson, admits that the party leadership did not realize that the debate around this reform would reach such a magnitude and that he, at the time, simply saw it as one political issue among many.

Maybe we misjudged its importance and maybe we focused on a number of other things, rightly or wrongly. One thing I remember is that the tsunami absorbed a lot of time and energy. Plus the fact that we had budgets to take care of. There was the Left Party and the Green Party and we had to negotiate with them in parliament, and of course they also prepared for the next election and started making all kinds of demands. We had apathetic refugee children and the right to asylum that the Green Party pressed on about and threatened to bring down a whole budget over and blah, blah, blah. [...] But I think we misjudged the

question, and therefore we did not prioritize it. Possibly we were focusing on entirely different things, that may even have been more important, week by week, day by day, so to speak, and then all of a sudden you're there, at the Congress.

(Interview with Jan Larsson)

The upcoming election was the most commonly mentioned direct reason for why it was not possible to prioritize the reform at this time. Because the reform was not perceived as a campaign issue that would attract voters, many party politicians, particularly those in the upper echelons of the party, felt that they could not prioritize the issue at this sensitive point in time (Interview with Wanja Lundby-Wedin). Pragmatism, not ideology, guided the opponents of the reform. In fact, all the opponents claimed to be in favor of fathers taking a greater responsibility for the care of their children. One interviewee states that there was even a “numbing consensus” regarding these issues (Interview with Thomas Östros) and another says: “I was of course of the same opinion that most of us—needless to say—were; that is, I think that the whole party was of the opinion that we need to get a more equal use of the parental leave” (Interview with Berit Andnor). Most party members also saw a reform of the parental-leave system as the only feasible way to achieve this goal (Interviews with Jan Larsson, Berit Andnor, Thomas Östros, Tomas Eneroth, Wanja Lundby-Wedin, Mikael Damberg, Sven-Erik Österberg, and Marita Ulvskog). The Party Secretary General, Marita Ulvskog, claims that there was a broad support for individualized parental leave in the Social Democratic Party at the time, but that public opinion was not in favor of such a reform. The lack of public support became a very important argument in the party leadership, considering that there was an upcoming election that had to be considered (Interview with Marita Ulvskog).

Thus, we define opponents in this case not as party politicians who opposed the reform for ideological reasons, but as people who put forward (any) pragmatic argument for why the self-declared feminist Social Democrats should not advocate the reform at this critical point in time. As long as the actors themselves admit that they did not fight for the reform in the internal party struggle—whether it was because they were not willing or because they were not able to fight—we find it interesting to scrutinize their reasons for not doing so, and their reflections on what role their own and others’ expectations played in this decision.

### **The Male Privilege to Oppose**

Although male and female opponents to the reform give similar reasons for opposing the reform, they are depicted differently by others, depending on their sex; and female politicians describe their own opposition in distinctly different terms than their male colleagues do. The most vociferous proponents of the parental-leave reform place different expectations on male and female politicians. Female social democrats who are not perceived as fighting for the reform are described with intense disappointment, while such unconditional support and action is generally not expected from their male colleagues. In the interviews, the women also seem burdened by having to oppose a gender-equality reform whereas the men describe the parental-leave question more in terms of “a question among others.” What follows is thus an illustration of how external and internal mandates bind women to gender-equality issues, and leave doubts and potential delegitimization when this binding is ignored, whereas men are not bound to these issues and thus have the leeway to oppose or support issues more freely, without sanctions or consequences for their political legitimacy.

#### *External Mandate*

We first turn our gaze to the external mandate, that is, what other actors expect of male and female high-level politicians. In our interviews, social democratic party politicians readily assigned an additional gender-equality mandate when they talked about their female colleagues. Women were thus expected to carry the double burden of following the party line while simultaneously never giving up on their gender-equality mandate. Even when these two loyalties clearly collided, the women were blamed for not having stood up for the parental-leave reform.

Both Nalin Pekgul, the then-leader of S-Women (the women's section of the party), and Anne Ludvigsson, the vice-chair of S-Women, are very critical of the Minister for Social Affairs, Berit Andnor, and how she as the minister in charge handled the reform proposal to increase the individualization of the parental benefit. In fact, they perceive her as a hard-headed and long-term opponent of the parental-leave reform (Interviews with Nalin Pekgul and Anne Ludvigsson). Pekgul even nuances the picture in favor of Prime Minister Göran Persson, and claims that Andnor was the one who was strongly against the reform and that she influenced the Prime Minister in this direction (Interview with Nalin Pekgul). This depiction is in stark contrast to Andnor's own account, in which she, as a minister, felt that her primary task had to be to follow the party line and in which she could not and would not try to change the opinion of Prime Minister Göran Persson. She also described herself as personally in favor of the parental-leave reform (Interview with Berit Andnor), while others have interpreted her as a more socially conservative person who was actively working against the reform (Interviews with Jens Orback). One person who thinks that Andnor actually wanted a reform of the parental-leave system is the chair of a public committee on the parental-leave reform, Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson. He attributes her failure to advocate for the reform to her role as a loyal minister, but he still expresses disappointment that she did not dare to use her position in a

different way, to advocate for the reform instead (Interview with Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson). Similarly, the S-Women express disappointment in Secretary General Marita Ulvskog, who at the time started a new network, *Feministas*, to promote feminism and gender equality in the Social Democratic Party. *Feministas*, however, did not openly advocate the parental-leave reform. Considering that this was one of the most prioritized questions facing the S-Women at the time, Vice-Chair Ludvigsson interpreted this new initiative as a way for the Secretary General to counteract the reform. This was seen as a kind of betrayal to the agenda of the S-Women who were more in favor of the reform (Interview with Anne Ludvigsson). Ulvskog was also reported to openly oppose the reform in internal meetings (Interview with Nalin Pekgul). These women's choice to follow the party line and prioritize other issues is interpreted as a failure to stand up for gender-equality ideals and as open opposition to the parental-leave reform.

The same criticism is not discernable toward male high-level politicians. Even the Minister for Gender Equality, Jens Orback, who clearly should have an external gender mandate, is not criticized by any of the interviewees for his failure to publically support the reform. Female politicians receive the strongest criticism and are pictured as strong opponents who actively counteract any progress toward change. In accordance with theories of hegemonic masculinity, it is still not part of the hegemonic male role to take responsibility for issues relating to gender equality or family and children.

There is an interesting paradox in the material that relates to the difference between a hegemonic public discourse<sup>5</sup>, where gender equality is clearly present, and the hegemonic

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<sup>5</sup> By 'hegemonic public discourse', we refer to what politicians and other public figures perceive one can say publically. We thus do not refer to surveys of the public opinion (that may very well deviate from the hegemonic public discourse).

masculinity, where gender equality is still not expected. As a result, male politicians need to support gender equality in words—they all subscribe to the need for increased gender equality, and they are proud members of a feminist party. On the other hand, and in practice, because of their hegemonic male role, they still have the privilege of opposing a reform favoring gender equality without taking any risks. Instead, they will be met with gratitude for any small things they do. For example, Mikael Damberg, chairperson of a local Social Democratic district, is mentioned by Nalin Pekgul in very positive terms for being able to negotiate at a time when she could not get along with Berit Andnor (Interview with Nalin Pekgul).

However, the most interesting thing regarding the depiction of male politicians in our material is the fact that they are *not* mentioned by proponents, despite the fact that they all claim to be feminists in favor of gender equality and in favor of a reform of the parental-leave legislation. Neither women nor other men really seem to expect the male politicians to take on that responsibility, and thus they are not held accountable for saying one thing and then doing—if not another thing, at least nothing.

### *Internal Mandate*

The women interviewed spend more time during the interviews talking about gender-equality issues than the men do. They all seem to make a conscious effort to demonstrate that they genuinely care about the issue of parental leave and that they are knowledgeable about the details and the arguments. The men do not seem to feel that they have to prove to the interviewers (regardless of the interviewers' sex) that they are proponents of gender equality. Most of them mention gender equality as an obvious priority of the Social Democratic Party, and leave it at that. Thomas Östros, who was Minister of Industry and Trade and a member of

the party executive board in 2005, simply notes that feminists, too, want to win elections. He does not perceive it as problematic that he considers himself as a feminist on the one hand while opposing the parental-leave reform proposal on the other. He simply justifies his stance with the fact that a majority of the voters were against such a reform (Interview with Thomas Östros). As a general tendency, the interviewed female politicians talk about gender equality in general and the parental-leave reform in particular as something that can and should always be prioritized—an issue that one can never ignore. The male politicians, on the other hand, see it as an important question among many other equally—or even more important—questions that a top politician has to deal with.

The extra burden carried by female opponents with regards to the internal mandate is thus a need to justify why they did not stand up for a position that should always be defended. The Party Secretary General, Marita Ulvskog, describes it as “a big sorrow” that they were not able to move forward with this issue because they realized that it was not realistic (Interview with Marita Ulvskog). The male opponents only need to argue that at the time, they made the decision of prioritizing another important political issue.

All the people interviewed acknowledge the importance of the party whip and the wishes of the party leader, Göran Persson, regarding this particular question. But whereas the men more often simply refer to important partisan strategies, internalize them, and make them their own, the women tend to dissociate themselves from the electoral strategies of the party and instead refer to the need to be loyal to the party. Berit Andnor, the Minister for Social Affairs in 2005, repeatedly emphasizes that it is not about what she thinks about an issue, it is about toeing the party line. As a minister, she felt that she needed to listen to the party leader, the executive committee, and the Congress, rather than running her own race (Interview with Berit Andnor).

Wanja Lundby-Wedin was the leader of the labor trade union (LO) that had advocated a reform of the parental-leave system. As the leader of LO, Lundby-Wedin had a seat in the executive committee at the time of the Party Congress in 2005. She is very clear about personally being in favor of the reform. Yet she did not openly defend the reform proposal during the Social Democratic Congress.

I don't think I had the intention to say something about this issue, because I had been so clear about our position [...] But of course I wanted people to take this fight. My position was totally... it was kind of known. (Interview with Wanja Lundby-Wedin)

Thomas Östros, however, still refers to the electoral strategies as his own and to himself as part of the party, even though he has now left politics. He describes the Social Democratic Party as very pragmatic compared to parties more to the left. While parties to the left, according to Östros, think it may be worth losing an election to drive home an ideological point, this is not in line with the strategic thinking of the Social Democratic Party. (Interview with Thomas Östros)

Minister of Gender Equality Jens Orback is the only man who clearly depicts himself as troubled, drawn between a strong sense of responsibility toward gender equality on the one hand and a promise of loyalty toward the party leader on the other hand. Certainly in part because of his portfolio, he perceives that he has an internal mandate to support and fight for gender equality in all questions. He had been a vociferous supporter of a reform of the parental-leave system, but as a minister he had made up his mind that he would be loyal to his Prime Minister, or resign. He claims to have tried to influence Prime Minister Göran Persson, but he never publically defended the reform proposal. However, he clearly expresses his

discomfort with the situation, and that it was very difficult for him to believe in something strongly and yet not be able to act upon it (Interview with Jens Orback). While an internal mandate seems to be informally internalized by all women, regardless of position or portfolio, the only man who expresses concerns in line with an internal mandate is the man who was appointed Gender Equality Minister and who was therefore formally given such a mandate. As our interview material illustrates, the internal mandate—the mandate that politicians give to themselves—is certainly gendered.

## **Conclusion**

Within popular debates in many countries there is increased consensus that gender equality is an issue that concerns not only women and girls but also men and boys. This article has addressed the puzzling fact that male politicians, despite these advances in gender equality, still are less likely than female politicians to be drivers of gender-equality policy change. By linking theories of masculinity, feminist institutionalism and women's substantive representation, we have made the theoretical argument that there is a gendered leeway in politics. Men have more leeway than women in political maneuvering because they are able to escape from the double bind that female politicians experience due to external and internal gender mandates. Male politicians have greater possibilities than their female colleagues to choose not to advocate gender equality reforms because they are not blamed if they fail to adhere to gender equality ideals. Gender-equality responsibility is still not part of a hegemonic masculinity, and men are therefore able to look on gender-equality policy as on any other policy, without thinking twice about it. Female opposition to gender equality reforms, on the other hand, is often portrayed as a betrayal. The external mandate to support gender equality is suggested to be internalized by female politicians, who convey internal

struggles with their conscience whenever they feel unable to support an issue related to gender equality. The two-fold character of the gender mandate is important, because it demonstrates not only how women are constrained by others' expectations, but also how many women have certain expectations on themselves that are not shared by most men.

We illustrate our argument with an analysis of the social democratic opposition to reforming parental leave in Sweden. Despite defining themselves as proponents of gender equality, male social democratic politicians perceive a greater room for maneuvering than their female colleagues and are ready to oppose a gender-equality reform proposal if the political situation so demands—regardless of whether they agree with the intentions of the reform proposal or not. In contrast, women perceive a much stronger external and internal gender-equality mandate to push for reforms that benefit women as a group and appear to be more likely than men to be held accountable by gender-equality activists inside the party if they do not adhere to feminist ideals.

The theoretical argument put forward in this article suggests that men's "privilege to oppose" may have important implications for future possibilities of adopting gender-equality policies, and, in the long term, for possibilities of leveling out gender inequalities in society. As long as men's benefits are not being challenged and the responsibility to push for gender-equality reforms remains with women, male politicians with seemingly gender-friendly intentions can "keep their feet on the brake" without a cost—and thus constitute an "invisible" and perhaps unconscious but highly effective opposition to specific gender-equality policy reforms. For individual politicians, too, this analysis demonstrates that women are still constrained as politicians by a double bind that limits their political maneuverability. Male politicians have more leeway and can make strategic decisions and further their political careers without

always taking into account a potential dissonance between the party line on the one hand and a gender mandate on the other.

Therefore, a key challenge for scholars is to make male politicians visible in research on gender-equality policy reforms as well as in studies on substantive representation. For instance, the argument about external and internal mandates should be applied in other policy areas within gender politics, as well as in other empirical contexts. For instance, it is possible that the gendered leeway looks different depending on whether politicians in the particular context tend to view themselves primarily as representatives of the party or of a specific group. Research has shown that politicians in Nordic countries see themselves as both representing the party and a specific group (Esaiasson & Heidar 2000), which could imply that the tension between party demands and group demands that women in our analysis feel is particularly strong in the Swedish case.

Pushing the implications of this article even further, an extension of our analysis is to move beyond a focus on gender and consider transferring the argument to other identity groups, based on ethnicity, race, sexuality, etc. It is possible, or perhaps even likely, that not only women are ascribed mandates on the basis of (one of) their identities rather than on their proclaimed interests. If that is the case, the leeway is not only gendered but varies also along other dimensions and thus across other identity groups in society.

## **Interviews**

### ***Name, position in 2005, date of interview***

Berit Andnor, Minister of Social Affairs in the Social Democratic Government, member of the party board. November 8, 2012.

Mikael Damberg, Chairman of the local Social Democratic Party District of Stockholm County. November 19, 2012.

Thomas Eneroth, Social Democratic MP and head of the Parliamentary Committee of Social Insurance, member of the party board. November 15, 2012.

Jan Larsson, State Secretary under Prime Minister Göran Persson. November 8, 2012.

Wanja Lundby-Wedin, Chair of LO, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation. November 7, 2012.

Anne Ludvigsson, Vice-Chair of S-Women. January 23, 2012.

Jens Orback, Minister of Gender Equality. November 15, 2012.

Nalin Peggul, Chair of S-Women, member of the party board. February 14, 2012.

Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, Principal Investigator on the Inquiry of the Parental Leave Legislation. January 26, 2012.

Anna Thoursie, Secretary on the Inquiry of the Parental Leave Legislation. December 21, 2011.

Marita Ulvskog, Social Democratic MP, Secretary General of the party, member of the party board. November 29, 2012.

Sven-Erik Österberg, Junior Minister of Finance (*Bitr. Finansminister*), member of the party board. November 28, 2012.

Thomas Östros, Minister of Industry and Trade (*Näringsminister*), member of the party board. November 16, 2012.

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