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Feminist NGOs and the European Union: Contracting Opportunities and Strategic Response

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ABSTRACT *European women's organizations were among the first social movements to recognize the European Union (EU) as an important context for claim-making. From the mid-1990s, feminist groups had secured a representation to this transnational opportunity structure in the form of the European Women's Lobby (EWL), which receives EU funding, has access to policy setting, and is credited with a role in the construction and consolidation of EU gender equality policy. More recently, the EWL has experienced a contraction in the EU political opportunity context, a function of Eurocrisis dynamics that deem gender equality too costly at a time of austerity. EU progress on gender equality has stalled, with most policy advanced through non-binding or soft law mechanisms. This work assesses the implications of these shifts for the strategies and patterns of mobilization employed by the EWL as it works to exploit soft law opportunities and develop collaborative strategies with other EU non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and in other intergovernmental fora to promote a gendered analysis of the economic crises. Though this latter strategy is a relatively late and weak engagement on austerity, it marks a departure in strategic terms. The organization has also adopted strategies aimed at compensating for declining resources including seeking out new resource streams and cohering closely to topics where EU funding opportunities remain. Analysis of the EWL's response to this challenging political opportunity structure allows for an assessment of how feminist NGOs deal with austerity-based reductions in the political space and financial support for feminist mobilization and gender equality measures across Europe.*

KEY WORDS: Gender equality, international NGOs, women's rights, gender mainstreaming, austerity, political and economic opportunities, international governance, European Union

This work understands feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a part of a social movement form that has adapted to the European Union (EU) level, retaining some of the features of social movement organizations combined with organizational forms and practices of NGOs (Ruzza, 2011, pp. 453–469). When articulated at EU level, these organizations become characterized by institutionalization, professionalization, and NGOization. Notably, because these organizations are so closely tied to formal political processes, the political context operates as a powerful structuring force influencing their

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capacity to engender support from members, sustain a program of mobilization, and ultimately pursue broader movement goals. Shifts in these political opportunity structures (POSSs) that threaten movement resources and contract opportunities may continue to produce points of access but without the potential for influence (Edwards & McCarthy, 2007; Kreisi, 2007). For the women's movement, evidence suggests that feminists mobilizing close to institutional contexts can over time be incorporated into state bodies that are hollowed out or marginalized from centers of power and resources (Banaszak, 2010; McBride & Mazur, 2010).

In the analysis here, I explore the POS for and strategic responses of contemporary feminist mobilization during a period of austerity at the EU level. The European Women's Lobby (EWL), the largest EU-level feminist NGO – established in 1990, funded by the Commission of the EU, and representing 4000 organizations in an EU-wide alliance – provides the case study for this examination. The EWL has been credited with maintaining a feminist presence at EU level and having succeeded in alliance with European democrats to make important progress on issues including equal treatment in employment, violence against women (VAW), prostitution, and trafficking (Strid, 2009; Walby, 2011, pp. 29, 144; Woodward, 2008). The EWL's dependence on EU funding, its professional form, and use of conventional tactics have at the same time exposed it to criticism from feminist activists and scholars who refer to a lack of inclusiveness in its decision making and a lack of distance from its institutional sponsors (Agustin, 2013; Elman, 1996; Hobson, 2003; Hoskyns, 1996; Lang, 2009, 2014; Williams, 2003). The organization's development was supported by the European Community (EC), looking in the 1980s for a single point of access to the diverse topography of women's organizations across Europe (Agustin, 2012). Lang (2014) suggests that feminist NGOs such as the EWL adapted their organizational form over time to become partners in European governance responding to a system that 'demands fast and structured input that is aligned with preset agendas, and in general favours the expertise of large advocacy organizations' (p. 356). The EWL is viewed by the EU Commission as its main civil society interlocutor on women's issues and on that basis has occupied a stable policy niche at the EU level. This stability has been undermined by a demotion of gender equality within EU policy priorities and the broader punitive conditions of economic austerity confronting feminist concerns and activism across Europe (Jacquot, 2010, pp. 118–135; Lombardo, 2013; Lombardo & Rolandsen Agustin, 2011, pp. 1–31; Woodward, 2008). The marginalization of gender equality at the EU level is a mixture of long-term shifts away from binding legislation on equal treatment to soft law initiatives around gender mainstreaming (GM), diversity, and equality mainstreaming (Kantola & Squires, 2012). These trends have been intensified by efforts of EU member states, prompted in part by the economic crises, to resist the deepening of legislation on maternity leave, address the gender pay gap, or legislate in the area of sexual and reproductive health (Smith & Villa, 2010). This work asks how the EWL has responded to these longer term shifts in the POS for gender equality at the EU level and the more recent acceleration of these trends as a function of the economic crisis.

In what follows, I provide an account of the shifts in the POS for EU feminist mobilization, specifically how changes in how gender equality is understood and administered as a policy area have had implications for funding for women's rights and funding affecting women's rights. EU and member state responses to the economic crises are acknowledged in this account as contributors to the demotion of gender equality as a specific EU objective. Next, I detail how the EWL has worked to exploit the remaining

opportunities for action on gender issues at the EU level while campaigning to resuscitate the EU's commitment to gender equality and highlight the gendered nature of the EU crisis. Organizational survival is a key element structuring the EWL's strategies; as such, I outline the EWL's efforts to seek new resource streams from membership and the creation of new 'conscience constituents' and external stakeholders. A departure in strategic terms can be seen in the EWL's focus on applying economic expertise to input into highly technical EU budgetary processes, framed as an effort to gender the EU's response to the economic crises and more specifically to retain funding for EU gender equality initiatives including the EWL's own core funding. This strategy depends heavily on expertise from its members and alliances with other women's rights and non-feminist equality organizations that share a broad critique of the EU's austerity-led response to the current economic crisis. Pressure to resonate with issues where funding exists and EU support remains means campaigns on gender parity in decision making and VAW feature prominently in the organization's work. A brief overview of these campaigns reveals continuity in strategic terms as the EWL turns to intergovernmental venues including the Council of Europe (COE) and the United Nations (UN) in coalition-based campaigns with other NGOs to highlight the weakness of EU initiatives. Finally, I assess the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies and reflect on how this feminist NGO's efforts to maintain its relevance in a challenging POS can shed light on the strategies of adaptation employed by institutionalized mobilization on gender equality at a time of economic constraint.

The methodological approach draws on interview data and document analysis to examine the EWL in a case study approach. A case study of an organization has been acknowledged as a useful technique for researching the relationships, behaviors, attitudes and motivations that shape internal decision making processes and the role of external factors in shaping organizational strategy (Berg, 2007). Interview data provided insights from the perspective of key EU officials [especially from the Directorate General (DG) Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship], the EWL secretary general (who had served at the time of writing in various capacities in the EWL over a 13-year period), and a small convenience-based subsample of the EWL membership.¹

This work has a specific interest in the implications of administrative shifts within the Commission that resulted in reorganization of the location and jurisdiction of the Commission's gender equality unit.² Document analysis was conducted prior to and during the field work stage of research and included sampling of documents on issues highlighted by other research in this area, indicated by interviewees as illustrative of the issues they raised and from the authors' assessment of the most significant communications from the organization on shifts in the gender equality policy community.³

The limitations are those attendant to small sample size case study research that cannot provide a comprehensive review of an organization's activities or an audit of its entire membership, but rather an in-depth if partial account of patterns of mobilization. I provide a snapshot from different vantage points of the changes in gender equality policy community at the EU level in the context of austerity and specifically the response of the most central EU feminist non-state actor to these changes.

The EU as a POS

The EU features as an important POS in social movements analysis on either Europeanization of movements from below (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009; Marks &

McAdam, 1999; Monforte, 2009) or those interested in EU-level NGOs (Cullen, 2010; Paternotte, 2011; Ruzza, 2011). Two general factors are acknowledged as shaping the mixture of opportunities and constraints that are available to movements in this POS: the relative structural access the group has to the EU institutions and the general policy receptivity of the EU and the Commission in particular to issues salient to the movement. How successful such challengers are in adapting to this environment is also a function of the internal properties of a movement (Marks & McAdam, 1999). While the external context may be shaped by these factors, it is the mobilizing structures within which a movement emerges and the framing processes employed that influence how movements interact in political contexts characterized by elements of facilitation and constraint (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Access to EU officials, policy-setting contexts, and funding opportunities are all key elements of the EU political opportunity context. Elite allies and the capacity of institutional supporters to reduce or remove previous forms of access or support all play key roles in shaping activists' choices about goals, tactics, and strategies. Resource constraints also shape the mobilizing structures available for movement work to take place. This said, it is important that any analysis of EU-level NGOs does not reduce NGO actors and their organizational contexts simply to a function of issues of resource dependency and POS. An important finding of work on the EU as a POS for NGOs has been the existence of forms of iterative relationship between NGOs and institutional contexts, where NGO actors are acknowledged as highly skilled and reflexive agents (Cullen, 2010; Ruzza, 2011). This research has an explicit focus on feminist mobilization at EU level and more specifically the EU NGO interface in the context of the gender equality policy community, and as such it is informed by feminist perspectives of EU-level processes (Agustin, 2009, 2012; Ferree, 2009; Kantola, 2010; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Lombardo & Forest, 2012; Lombardo & Rolandsen Agustin, 2011; Woodward, 2008, 2012) that although informed by social movement theorization has yet to explore comprehensively feminist mobilization in this arena (but see Agustin, 2013).

While social movement scholars have more recently begun to empirically map and theorize how popular movements, including, trade union, direct action, neighborhood, and Occupy, are working to resist austerity (Flesher Fominaya, & Cox, 2013) and others have examined how national-level NGOs have responded to cuts in public funding (Annesley, 2012; Sanchez Salgado, 2013), and there has been little reflection on how social movement organizations (SMOs) including international feminist NGOs have reacted to the current financial crisis. This work aims to begin to fill this gap by examining the relationship between this feminist NGO and the economic and political opportunity context in a period of financial crisis and austerity.

Economic Crisis and Gender Equality in Europe

Empirical analysis of political agenda setting and gender equality across European countries suggests that economic downturns severely limit opportunities for gender equality advocates to push issues that require resources from registering on the political agenda and or moving on to the policy-making context (Annesley, Engeli, Gains, & Resodihardjo, 2014). Economic crises and austerity are also argued to be a critical juncture for gender and social regimes as political responses to economic recession reveal the fragility and thinness of commitments at the EU level and across European societies to gender equality. Gender has also been largely invisible in analyses and policy responses to

the economic crises despite the fact that women have been disproportionately affected by austerity. The EU is marked out as providing a striking example of a U-turn in the importance attached to gender equality as a social goal that although originating in shifts in the late 1990s has been more stark as the ‘Eurocrisis’ has unfolded (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013, p. 334).

Villa and Smith’s (2013) analysis of the relegation of EU gender equality policy suggests that a number of factors had over time coalesced to provide a supportive context for activism on gender equality at the EU level. These included a rise in female labor market participation, a commitment to a social democratic model alongside a neoliberal one at EU level, the influence of a constellation of pro-gender equality actors inside and outside institutions, and the recent accession in the early to mid-1990s of Nordic states where gender equality was a high priority. However, by the 2000s, the position of gender equality began to be eroded, as key actors in favor were sidelined both internally in the Commission and externally in member states. Member states had also embraced more right-wing and neoliberal paradigms. In addition, the EU enlarged during this period to include new states from central and eastern Europe characterized by more traditional notions of gender and familial roles. By the launch in 2010 of Europe 2020, the EU’s 10-year growth strategy, gender was conspicuous by its absence (Villa & Smith, 2013, pp. 287–289).

A key factor in the declining visibility of gender equality on the political agendas of European states is the silencing or absence of strategically placed and well-resourced feminist movement actors. Woodward (2008) was the first to deploy the term ‘velvet triangle’ to describe how EU-level femocrats, feminist academics, and experts, as well as women’s movement activists worked together to secure initiatives on gender equality. The EWL is acknowledged as having played an important role in the ‘velvet triangle’ as the organization worked in coalition with like-minded EU officials and members of the European Parliament (EP) to consolidate and extend gains made in EU gender equality policy (Lang, 2009, 2014; Woodward, 2008; Zippel, 2009).

The Case: The EWL

The EWL’s formal mission is to achieve equality between men and women, eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and ensure that women’s human rights are respected. The EWL secretariat is based in Brussels with member organizations in 28 EU member states and three candidate countries. The General Assembly of the EWL meets annually and delegates gather to review its work, elect its board, and provide a democratic mandate by supporting motions for the policies and work priorities of the EWL. The EWL is rooted in the women’s grassroots movement through its organizational structure, but its main role is to influence EU law and policy and as such is highly geared toward exercising ‘policy-specific’ opportunities at the EU level (Bygnes, 2013, pp. 21–22). Strid (2009) characterizes relations between the EWL and the European Commission as corporatist and institutionalized in nature providing the organization a form of representative monopoly to influence EU policy-making. She finds little evidence of capture by the EU institutions, but some evidence that the EWL has marginalized more radical women’s groups’ efforts to gain access to EU officials and policy-setting arenas (Strid, 2009, pp. 46, 194–197). A relatively small secretariat and the proliferation of soft law instruments that reduce footholds for legal action on gender equality means that lobbying and the provision of

information and expertise predominates rather than direct action or judicial activism (Jacquot & Vitale, 2014).

When operating at the EU level, NGOs are strongly incentivized to frame their claims and fit their campaigns within a discourse that resonates with EU-level policy-makers (Cullen, 2010; Ruzza, 2004). Lang (2014, pp. 351–353, 369) points out that compared to other NGOs, feminist NGOs face a specifically complex policy context, posses fewer resources, and must deal with the ‘gender fatigue’ that characterizes official policy contexts.

Others working on national-level developments draw attention not to the risks of incorporation but to the vulnerability of feminist mobilization close to institutional contexts. Rodgers and Knight’s (2011) analysis of the deinstitutionalization of the Canadian women’s movement details how in the aftermath of diminished state support, feminist organizations struggled to negotiate the pressures of declining funding and contracting opportunities for engagement with the state. The erosion of state support for feminist projects had a direct effect on the ability of feminists to launch campaigns to protect existing gains. Similar developments at EU level indicate the vulnerability of feminist organizations that are wholly dependent on institutional funds and whom face significant threats when those funds decline as a result of a steady erosion in political investment in pursuing gender equality. When austerity is placed in the mix, feminist movements face additional pressures.

The EU Gender Equality Regime: A Soft Law Opportunity Context?

While the EU is often celebrated as a source of important gender equality law, the past decade has evidenced a shift at EU level from binding legislation on equal treatment to soft law or non-binding approaches under the rubric of GM.⁴ GM, which requires that policy be screened to ensure that gender equality is promoted, is part of the EU’s treaty duties. The obligation to GM originated in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, and generated non-discrimination law, positive duties as well as comparative data collection, indicators of gender equality and standard setting (Woodward, 2012, p. 46).⁵ Assessments of EU GM indicate that it is under-resourced and understood at national level as a largely technocratic exercise (Daly, 2005; Meier & Celis, 2011, pp. 469–489; Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000; Woodward, 2008). Lombardo’s (2013) assessment of GM in the economic crises reveals its lack of embeddedness, stating that

the ongoing economic and financial crisis brought to the surface longstanding problems in the implementation of gender mainstreaming in European policy making by showing how EU policy responses to the crisis subordinated gender equality to the ‘more pressing’ economic priorities. (p. 37)

While GM has been difficult to implement, it has had contradictory outcomes in opening up the way to tackling new fields of action beyond those tied to the labor market, while at the same shifting power within the gender equality community, which was split by the adoption of this new instrument. On the latter point, Jacquot (2010, p. 130) in particular argues that those who rejected it have progressively been marginalized, especially within the Commission, with a knock on effect that the traditional ‘velvet triangle’ has lost most of its administrative and budgetary autonomy. In addition, mainstreaming has been

diffused within a broader equality and anti-discrimination framework described as equality mainstreaming. These later developments have contributed to the downgrading of the special status of gender equality in favor of a broader approach to tackling discrimination ‘that can be observed in the transformation of legislative and budgetary instruments’ (Jacquot, 2010, p. 129). Drawing on concepts of non-discrimination and multiple discriminations, the EU has moved to promote equality mainstreaming while initiatives on gender equality have stagnated (Woodward, 2008).

Although the EWL is highly critical of the weakness of the EU’s approach to GM, it maintains a form of nominal support and has used the process to campaign on new issues not directly linked to economic policy such as human trafficking, VAW, and immigration and asylum (EWL, 2009a; Jacquot, 2010, p. 30). Analysis of campaign materials and annual programs reveal that while the EWL (2009b) maintains support for a beefed-up version of GM, it makes clear that equality mainstreaming is a negative development. The EWL 2011 work program identifies the primary challenge facing the organization as the ‘increasing political shift from equality between women and men, towards policies aiming at “equality for all”’ (EWL, 2011c, p. 2). In substantive terms, equality mainstreaming resulted in the relocation in January 2011 of gender equality from the competence of the DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG Employment) to DG Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship (DG Justice). This shift marked the consolidation of gender issues within a broader approach on equality and diversity under the banner of fundamental rights, citizenship, and non-discrimination. DG Justice in its purview of promoting and enforcing the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights has formal competence in areas including VAW, and the rights of migrant women and the Roma community.⁶ Funding for the EWL is now sourced from this context.

In interview, the EWL secretary general characterized these developments in terms of opportunity and constraint, commenting that the opportunities lay in the possibility for her organization to connect their campaigns with the EU’s formal commitment to fundamental rights (Interview with EWL Secretary General, September 2011; Interview with EU Official DG Justice, September 2011). Guaranteeing women’s fundamental rights featured as a core objective in the EWL work 2011 program signaling an effort to align the organization with the discourse of its new institutional sponsor (EWL, 2011c, p. 4). The constraints included the non-binding quality of much of this rights-based EU policy and the cultural shift from DG Employment that had a tradition of engagement with NGOs to one where interaction with NGOs occurs less frequently. For the secretary general,

the biggest problem is that it marks a shift away from employment and social policy where the EU has competencies to an area of soft law, and that the result will be that the focus of gender equality as a social policy and employment issue is lost. (Interview with EWL Secretary General, September 2011).

Ironically, while women’s organizations’ have long bemoaned how gender equality has been so firmly tied to labor market and economic concerns at EU level and have worked to push gender issues beyond this remit, they now caution against the risks of severing the foundational link between gender issues and the *raison d’être* of the EU, economic integration, its core competence. Analysis of the EU employment strategies echo this assessment indicating that this administrative move has worked to distance gender equality from employment policy resulting in gender equality input being spread thinly

across the Commission (Villa & Smith, 2013). Aside from the move of gender issues to a DG where the EWL had less affinity with officials and where a securitized justice frame dominates, the move also marked a more significant shift toward reducing EU funds to support equality NGOs, the EWL included.

Social movement mobilization on the international level is resource intensive and in the absence of opportunities to leverage the influence that may come from elite allies or footholds in international law, a reduction in core funding has a strong demobilizing potential. Analysis of EU budgets on gender equality between 2005 and 2011 revealed that women's NGOs received the smallest proportion of EU monies allocated to raise awareness on gender equality, with governments, local administrations, and other bodies taking priority (Lang, 2014, p. 357). In more recent times, the shift to DG Justice has more specific implications for resources for gender equality measures including support for the EWL. In a background document on future funding in this policy area after 2013, the Commission outlined plans for a number of changes including a move to larger grants and a reconsideration of 'the usefulness of operating grants to NGOs given the high administrative cost of this form of support, the limited impact and the difficulty for NGOs to achieve a European dimension' (European Commission, Directorate General Justice, 2011, p. 23; Interview with DG Justice-Equality Official, March 2011). In their official response to these proposals, the EWL (2011d, p. 1) cautioned against the move to fewer but larger grants on the grounds that it would inevitably increase competition between organizations seeking support. Planning for the current EU budget (2014–2020) contains a proposal that would deny core funding to any organization that ran a deficit in its finances (European Commission, 2011a, p. 6; EWL, 2011d, p. 1). The EWL has been running a deficit for a number of years and although it has made some progress in reducing it, this debt does marks it out as particularly vulnerable (Interview with EWL Secretary General, 18 September 2011; Interview with the National Member of the EWL, 25 October 2013; Email Communication from National Member Organization, 14 November 2013).

The EWL must advocate for a renewal of its funding from year to year. However, while the organization has retained a large percentage of its core funding, receiving 83% of its total budget from the EU funds in 2011,⁷ the reliability of this support and their claim to be the main representative channel for women's interests at the EU level have been periodically challenged. Budgetary debates in the EP on the financing of organizations within the field of gender equality have always been controversial, but up to 2002 a single budget line for women's organizations had been earmarked for the EWL. However, after 2002, conservative and right-wing Members of European Parliament (MEP), in alliance with newly established EU conservative women's organizations, managed to reword the budgetary text to remove the EWL's protected status (Agustin, 2012, p. 36). A more recent gender-impact assessment of negotiations for the main EU budgetary mechanism, the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020, found a lack of clear and visible budget lines aimed at promoting gender equality (Brodolini, 2012, p. 131). Assessing the funding projections for DG Justice, the report concluded the likelihood of an overall downturn trend for monies allocated to gender measures in EU instruments including the European Social Fund and specifically for monies to support women's rights organizations (Brodolini Fondazione Giacomo for the European Commission, 2012, pp. 139–141).

For SMOs, the pressure to constantly seek out and maintain resources is in itself a resource-costly activity and can in certain circumstances lead to a degree of displacement from movement goals (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Sanchez Salgado (2013) explores

how the economic crisis has affected public spending on international aid and how cuts in the availability of public funds have affected the goals, tactics, and strategies of SMOs. Her work suggests that organizations work to compensate for shifts in the economic and political opportunity context by employing a mixture of defensive strategies including a reduction in expenses and assertive strategies such as searching for alternative funds and restructuring of programs and activities. An external assessment commissioned by the EWL in 2011 had drawn attention to problems in the organizations' financial mechanisms and sustainability recommending a review of financial management, the appointment of a financial officer, an opening up to new stakeholders, and an increase in membership fees (EWL Board of Administration, 2011e, p. 1). In response, the EWL launched website-based campaigns to elicit funds through calls to commercial, foundation, and organizational sponsors, through legacy donations and an option for monthly donation by joining a community of 'Friends of the EWL'.

National members report that the organization devoted a significant amount of time at its annual general meetings to the EWL's deficit and efforts to raise additional funds. As one national representative stated, 'It seemed as if our AGMs were mostly devoted to discussing the EWL's deficit rather than our future mobilizations' (Interview with National Member, 26 October 2013). Members also report being placed under pressure to pay an increased membership fee, but refused the request claiming the EWL needed to be more sensitive to the significant cuts their members were experiencing to their own funding sources (Email Communication from National Member, 18 November 2013). Turning toward the membership to compensate for a reduction in funding is a limiting strategy particularly when funding sources supporting national members are also in decline. Both strategies have risks in potentially alienating and excluding members, particularly those in less well-resourced member states, and of opening the organization up to commercial entities that may bring conditionalities.

Aside from compensatory strategies, the EWL has campaigned publically on the decline in financial support for EU gender equality measures and the absence of a gender perspective on the financial crisis. The acquisition of technical expertise, particularly on the complex and highly technical EU budgetary processes, is emerging as an important element of the EWL action repertoire (EWL, 2011d, p. 4). However, the organization relies on the expertise of its members, EP reports, and analysis supplied by other NGO allies to make its case for a gendering of EU economic policy.

Gendering Economic Expertise and the Eurocrisis

Annesley (2012, pp. 21–22) outlines how in the UK, feminist activist organizations the Fawcett society and the Women's Budget Group linked up with mainstream economists to conduct their own gender audit of austerity measures. This marked a departure for feminist mobilization in the UK. Although the EWL lists over 300 documents that relate to the 'crisis' on its website, most relate to the work of gender experts, academic analysis, and reports commissioned by the EP. The EWL did produce its first position paper on the crisis in 2009 entitled 'Women, the Financial and Economic Crisis – the Urgency of a Gender Perspective' that in broadly qualitative terms called for an assessment of the gender impact of the crisis (EWL, 2009a). Between 2009 and 2012, the organization produced a number of communications that called for gender budgeting and or highlighted the work of its members in linking issues such as the rise of VAW and the economic crises or the

implications of cuts to public services and to women's organizations for vulnerable women and children.⁸

However, it was not until 2012 that the EWL surveyed its members in a more systematic way, publishing a report that contained gender disaggregated data. The report, 'The price of austerity – The impact on women's rights and gender equality in Europe,' relied in part on data supplied by 13 member organizations to outline the impact of austerity on wages, services and benefits, funding for women's rights, and gender equality. A key call in the document is for women's organizations to urgently engage in budgetary processes 'and move to the less trodden territory of financial political actors' (EWL, 2012b, p. 2). However, members' assessment of these contributions suggests that these inputs lacked teeth. As one national member interviewed commented:

at the start of the recession they asked me to do a brief input to their General Assembly 2009 on the recession and following that they set up an Economic Working Group, of which I was on. It produced a paper on the impact of the recession on women for the EWL but after that there was a sense of the ball being dropped and little follow up back to the national members. (Interview with National Member, 26 September 2013)

The organization did contribute a gender audit of EU recommendations to member states on their responses to the recession or National Economic Reform Programs (EWL, 2011b). However, a lack of in-house expertise on gender budgeting, coupled with the need to address the absence of not only a gendered analysis of member state responses to the crisis but also of EU policies on fiscal consolidation, produced a heavy reliance member input. As a result, data from the best resourced members with the strongest women's rights organizations dominate most communications. There is also a feeling from some members that the EWL, as the EU-level representative on women's rights, should have taken a stronger and more consistent position on the EU crisis and associated austerity. Some members suggested that, instead of replicating the variable efforts of differently resourced members to 'gender the crises', the EWL could have provided more support to its own members, including tools and data to help them mobilize on EU budgetary processes (Interview Data and Email Communication from National Members, September 2011, November 2012, October 2013).

The decision to invest in technical expertise was noted by the secretary general to present a significant challenge. She commented that 'we are unused to taking part in this kind of technical process, it is a big change for us but now we are now committed to building the expertise' (Interview with Secretary General of the EWL, September 2011). Sympathetic allies in the Commission and the EP had requested gendered technical inputs from the EWL (Interview with Commission Official, 18 September 2011). However, this was a balancing act as the secretary general explained, 'we are under pressure to provide gender expertise that is linked to evidence from member states and that displays a fluency in technical economic data and analysis but that does not appear too overtly feminist or value based' (Interview with Secretary General of the EWL, 11 September 2011). Notably, most submissions on the Eurocrisis were also used as opportunities to argue for the organization's own budgetary future. This said, the EWL also worked in collaboration with like-minded women's rights and social justice and development organizations to mobilize against the predominant economic model deployed at the EU level.

This coalition work included demands for independent funding programs for gender equality separate from those associated with equality mainstreaming (EWL, 2011a; Oxfam & EWL, 2009). For example, in an alliance with WIDE (a global network of women's organizations) and Concord (the European NGO confederation for relief and development), the EWL campaigned for

establishing a strong and independent funding programme for equality between women and men, non-discrimination, and fundamental rights within the budget heading 'Security and Citizenship' in order to guarantee a sustained level of funding and visibility for these crucial EU objectives. (EWL, 2011a)

It is clear that opportunities to source funds from EU policy where gender is an explicit objective policy are diminishing. This said, the EWL is strategically adapting to this reality and most of its work is now focused on connecting to DG Justice initiatives on funding areas, including the newest phase of the Daphne program on combating VAW and a Europe for Citizens program that supports work on women in decision making. An effort to increase the proportion of women on corporate boards through voluntary agreement on gender quotas has been the single flagship initiative for DG Justice in the area of gender equality. This initiative now features in EWL campaign materials and on its website (DG Justice Women on the Board Pledge, 2011; EWL, 2013a). Gender parity in politics is the newest focus of the DG Justice approach on gender equality. For example, a December 2013 call to support NGOs working on equality issues for 2014 and beyond included a single gender topic out of 10 budget lines aimed at addressing the gender imbalance in the EP elections (European Commission, 2013). Eager to resonate with this focus, in November 2013 the EWL initiated the 50/50 Parity Campaign in coalition with political parties in the EP, aimed at addressing poor rates of female representation in political assemblies (EWL, 2013b).

As part of the soft law POS on gender and equality issues, the EU funds two agencies that generate expertise on equality and discrimination: the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). Both contexts are of increasing relevance for the EWL (Brodolini, 2012, p. 140). The FRA and the EIGE work as research hubs generating benchmarking data and providing consultation to the EU institutions, and can be seen as either a resource for or as a competitor to the EWL in its efforts to define and influence EU gender equality issues.

Agencies, Institutes, and Soft Law

Launched in 2009 after a 10-year delay, the EIGE was the outcome of contests between conservative women's organizations that wanted to keep the institute as a politically neutral think tank and other interests, including the EWL, who pushed for a strong feminist perspective (Agustin, 2012; EWL, 2005). In a 2005 position paper on the Institute, the EWL called for a role for the EIGE to evaluate EU legislation, to work as a force to help concretize GM at EU level, and for the involvement of NGOs in the governing bodies with voting rights (EWL, 2005, pp. 2–6). The EWL did not succeed in these demands and has been critical of the EIGE, characterizing it as undermined by its 'weak feminist perspective, its distant location and small budget' (Interview with EWL general secretary general, September 2011). Although the EWL's president is currently member of a

consultative body (or experts' forum) established by the EIGE, he/she is not a member of its management board and therefore has no role in directly influencing the Institute. A central project for the EIGE is the production of an EU gender index, launched in June 2013, and similar to the comparative data collection tool used at UN level to assess nations' progress on gender equality. While the EWL publicizes EIGE research, it launched its own more pointed gender equality index in November 2013, 'Women's Watch,' described by the organization as the first 'genuinely feminist appraisal of the situation on the ground in 30 European countries with regard to women's rights and gender equality' (EWL, 2013c).

The FRA works in tandem with the EIGE, commissioning research and the promotion of benchmarking and best practice in the area of equality and discrimination. The FRA lists its core themes as children's rights and minorities, with a specific focus on VAW and Roma women. The EWL has been critical of the absence of a strong gender profile in the FRA work program (Interview with Past Vice President of the EWL, June 2012a; EWL, 2009c). The establishment in 2008 by the FRA of a Fundamental Rights Platform to interface with NGOs was noted by the EWL as having little gender balance in its composition and having members 'who did not share the same values as the social NGO community.' This said, the EWL decision in 2010 to join this Platform was justified 'as a means to input into the organization's work programme' (Interview with EWL secretary general, September 2011) and is clearly an effort to take advantage of the fundamental rights elements of DG Justice and more generally maintain a presence within a growing architecture of expertise-generating fora, in lieu of legislation or policy on gender equality.

The Daphne program is a central campaign for the EWL, linking the issues of VAW with prostitution and trafficking. Established in 2000, the program's aims are 'to contribute to the prevention of, and the fight against all forms of violence occurring in the public or the private domain, including sexual exploitation and trafficking of human beings' (European Commission, 2013). It also constitutes an important source of funding for European women's organizations, and when it seemed to be under threat as a result of equality mainstreaming, the EWL (2012c) campaigned for its continuation using the rationale of a link between the recession and rising rates of VAW. The EWL has been lauded for its role in originating a network of national observatories on VAW and for pushing the EU to make the albeit controversial link between VAW, prostitution, and human trafficking (Montoya, 2011). Support for a dedicated EU strategy on 'gender violence' had been mooted within the EU institutions since late 2009 and was given force by a EP resolution that asked the Commission to outline a new EU policy framework. The EWL secretary general stated that the EWL had placed the issue on its agenda for two reasons: because it was the only issue with a gender focus that was receiving any support from EU officials; and as a result of pressure from their membership, in particular demands from women's shelters experiencing cuts and pressure on services as a result of austerity (Interview with EWL Secretary General, September 2011).

The EWL 2011 annual conference and the inaugural issue of its e-magazine *European Women's Voice* were devoted to VAW. The EWL website features extensive resources on campaigns to criminalize prostitution and combat VAW. These actions suggest investment in an issue that has broad normative support at a time of diminished opportunities to push for progress in other areas of gender equality. It also illustrates this feminist NGO's use of venue shopping and coalition-building to push its movement

goals, as the most of the EWL lobbying on the issue takes the form of calls for EU accession to and/or adoption of internal human rights instruments in the UN and COE. Coalition-building also features as a strategy, including a campaign involving feminist and non-feminist groups, in part to get VAW ‘beyond the realm of narrow EU definitions and out of the EU women’s organizations’ ghetto’ (Interview with EWL Secretary General, 22 September 2011; EWL, 2011f). However, in June 2011, the new director of equality issues in DG Justice stated that the Commission had decided against an EU strategy and would promote a GM approach instead on the basis of weak support from member states for extending EU competence in this area and as part of a broader commitment to employing mainstreaming across issues related to discrimination and equality (European Commission, 2011b). The reluctance of EU member states to proceed with a hard law framework on the issue of VAW indicates the limits of strategies that attempt to push gender equality beyond the softer boundaries established by the mainstreaming approach to equality.

Conclusion and Discussion

Political structures and opportunities influence arenas of mobilization by creating routes of influence and setting limits on access to resources, allies, and authorities. Movements do change strategies over time in response to shifts in aspects of the POS. As political alignments change, movements may enjoy greater resources; alternatively, increased threats or decreased responsiveness from authorities make institutional strategies appear inadequate (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012). Villa and Smith (2013) argue that the relative ease with which gender equality has been demoted in EU policy is evidence of its inherent weakness and the absence of a strong counter mobilization against its decline. Annesley (2012, p. 20), looking at the UK case, states how a combination of an absence of feminist allies in institutional elites and the dismantling of gender equality machinery has resulted in a situation where feminist mobilization now again operates from the outside. Both Villa and Smith (2013) and Annesley (2012) acknowledge the importance of insider strategies for progress on gender equality. For the case examined here, EU and member state responses to the financial crisis that intensified a trajectory of demotion for EU gender equality policy marks a significant shift in policy receptivity toward and structural access for EU feminist mobilization. The EWL offers an empirical example of the strategic adaptation of institutionalized feminist mobilization in a difficult economic and political context. Engagement with EU budgetary processes and efforts to gender the crises illustrates a capacity to respond to an increasingly repressive context. Mining of soft law opportunities and attempts to re-insinuate itself into the EU mainstreaming approach to equality indicate the necessity to maintain coherence with EU policy imperatives, an essential element in the EWL’s organizational survival. Opportunities do exist but are tied to the ascendance of the EU as a venue for gender expertise rather than policy or legislation aimed at redressing gender inequity. Increasing precarity and competition for funding also narrows the options available to feminist organizations and places them into an organizational survival mode. In sum, this research illustrates the relationship between political opportunities, economic context, and feminist mobilization, and points to the analysis that suggests that the influence of economic constraints in the absence of a strong set of elite allies increases the moderating aspects of feminist institutional engagement.

Notes

1. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the secretary general of the EWL in June 2011 and September 2011, with a past vice president of the EWL and director of its observatory on VAW in July 2012, with three officials from DG Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, and with an official responsible for relations with equality anti-discrimination NGOs in September 2011. These interviews were augmented by face-to-face and phone interviews and email contact with the two national member organizations of the EWL in September and October 2011, June 2012 and October 2013. National members are kept anonymous due to the small sample size and the sensitivities of their contributions.
2. I do not include data on other EU institutional contexts including the European Council or the EP. This said, this research is informed by recent scholarship that has assessed longer term shifts in relations between the EWL and the EP, documenting the shift away from exclusive funding for the EWL to a more competitive funding context for this feminist NGO and for gender-equality programs more generally (Agustin, 2012).
3. Publicly available documents were accessed from the EWL site and obtained from the secretariat. Internal documents were supplied by the secretariat and two national members. Documents were selected that indicated alliance or evidence where the EWL used other intergovernmental venues or coalition spaces to advocate on specific issues including equality mainstreaming and anti-discrimination, VAW, and budgetary processes
4. A move away from hard law approaches that encouraged harmonization of policies to a soft law approach based on self-regulation that gave member states more freedom to implement policies as they see fit has had significant implications for activists interested in the potential of EU law to force change in member states.
5. Other elements of EU soft law on gender equality include an EU Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010–2015, EU Women's Charter launched in March 2010, and a Pact for Gender Equality 2011–2020. All documents are absent of any commitment to introduce new legislation or measures binding on member states.
6. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU became legally binding across the EU with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, and it compels the EU institutions to respect the rights enshrined in the Charter but only applies to EU countries when they implement the EU law. The most direct gender impact of the Charter is in its article 23 that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender and supports the right to equal treatment.
7. See <http://www.womenlobby.org/about-us/how-we-work/budget/article/our-budget-2011?lang=en>
8. See <http://www.womenlobby.org/spip.php?page=recherche&lang=en&recherche=crisis> (accessed 13 March 2013).

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