

EU Gender Equality for Export?

A discourse analysis and postcolonial feminist critique of the construction of 'gender equality' in the EU Gender Action Plan II

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Abstract

This study employs an approach to policy *as discourse* and examines the construction of gender equality in the EU Gender Action Plan II. Drawing from the poststructural premise that discourses affect how issues are being thought about and acted upon, the study seeks to scrutinize how gender equality is attributed with meaning by applying Carol Bacchi's analytical methodology *What's the problem represented to be?*. As a way of broadening the critical perspective, the findings are examined through a theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism. The analysis reveals that gender equality is represented as a fundamental value with strong moral and ethical implications, as well as an instrumental incentive. To the latter, gender equality is presented as a means to achieve other societal goals. Further, the analysis unveils that the discourse builds on an understanding of gender (in)equality drawn from Western preconceptions. Consequently, the complex interaction of power structures is reduced into two polarities according to which women are presumed as victims of male domination. This universalization of women does not only neglect the experiences of women in the third world, but may also fail to address the root causes of inequality. Potentially, GAP II may even be counterproductive in its envision to empower women and girls.

Key words: gender equality, European Union (EU), Gender Action Plan II, discourse analysis, Bacchi, WPR, postcolonial feminism

Word count: 9997

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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the European Union's commitments to gender equality have expanded far beyond the union borders and are nowadays a prominent cornerstone of the EU's self-identity as a global actor. Together with the member states, the EU is the world's largest donor of development assistance and has established relations with third, neighbourhood and enlargement countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe (European Commission). In the area of development policy, the EU has adopted several high-level policies which emphasize the inclusion of gender equality in all activities on a global, national, and regional level (Debausscher, 2013: 32). As a result, the EU's notion of gender equality does not only apply to operations within member states, but also transnationally.

A strand of academic scholars have conceptualized the nature of the EU as a "Normative Power". Rather than exerting military or economic power, the EU has the power to set trends and define the normal in international relations (Manners, 2002: 253). This body of literature has drawn attention to the role of the EU as a gender promoter in external relations. Yet, much of the research is focused on the implementation, outcome and efficiency of the EU's gender equality agenda, while the meaning of gender equality that the EU exports has been less explored. Despite the absence of any wider scientific discourse on this topic, academics such as Johanna Kantola argue that "definitions of what constitutes gender equality matter, however, because they have very real effects" (2010: 11). The specific values, ideas, problems and priorities attributed to gender equality by the EU give rise to certain forms of actions, changes and opportunities, while others become neglected or never even concerned (Grip, 2016: 95). Consequently, the EU's conceptualization of gender equality in external relations have social and material effects in the everyday lives of people.

Drawing from the poststructural assumption that gender equality is "a discourse, a framework of meaning, filled with complexities and ambiguities" (Bacchi, 2009b: 204), this study engages in a critical examination of the construction of gender equality in the EU Gender Action Plan II. The action plan represents the context, rationale and prevailing priorities of the EU's political commitment to gender equality in all external relations during 2016-2020. The discourse is therefore situated at the heart of the EU's policy-making of gender equality commitments in external relations. By assessing the findings of the discourse analysis through a theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism, the study seeks to go beyond description and engage in a discussion on the effects that can be derived from the discourse. Doing so, the study aims to unveil the power dynamics supporting the discourse, while also contribute to a critical strand of academic discussion on gender equality and development.

1.1 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to examine the construction of gender equality in the EU Gender Action Plan II *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – Transforming the lives of women and girls through EU External Relations 2016-2020*. The study is based on the social constructivist premise that gender equality is an ambiguous and dynamic concept that may be attributed with different meanings and understandings. The academic incentive is underpinned by the notion that discourse “makes ways of seeing and ways of being” and are “strongly implicated in the exercise of power” (Smith, 2007: 172). Correspondingly, the understanding of gender equality proposed by the EU at a policy-making level does not only shape and limit the idea of what gender equality means, but also determines the related problems, adequate solutions and whom it concerns.

Against this background, the study will seek to answer the following question:

How is gender equality constructed in the EU Gender Action Plan II and what are the effects of this understanding of the concept?

The analysis builds on a poststructural and Foucault-influenced notion of discourse and will be guided by Carol Bacchi's analytical framework *What's the problem represented to be?* (WPR). Accordingly, the study will explore how gender equality is attributed with meaning by scrutinizing the underlying arguments, key concepts, binaries and categories. Further, based on Bacchi's categorisation of discursive, subjectification and lived effects, the study aims to highlight the consequences of the discourse through the theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism. Rooted in a critique towards neo-colonialism and Eurocentric feminism, postcolonial feminism offers a critical approach to knowledge and is therefore well suited for the purpose of this study. Moreover, and I borrow from Kamini Jaipal-Jamini's formulation, “the inclusion of key constructs from critical theorists enables a convergence of the interpretations and validation of discourse analysis, since it provides insights from a broader and critical perspective” (2014: 805).

Inevitably, as the findings of the study will be coloured by the theoretical orientation, the analysis and results should be read as a postcolonial feminist contribution and critique of the GAP II, rather than an exhaustive investigation of the discourse and its effects.

1.2 Outline

The study begins with a review of the research context and briefly outlines the dominant paradigms of gender equality in the field of development policy where much of the current academic debate is taking place. In addition, the EU Gender Action Plan II is presented, as well as previous studies in the field of gender equality and EU external relations which have inspired the topic for this study. Next, Chapter 3 presents the method and theory, and further explores the epistemological and ontological underpinnings and objectives of the poststructural discourse analysis. The premises and application of Carol Bacchi's analytical strategy *What's the problem represented to be?* are also discussed. As method and theory are interrelated in discourse analysis, postcolonial feminism is also outlined in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the methodological and theoretical imprints on the study's validity and reliability.

The analysis is divided into two chapters, whereby Chapter 4 addresses the discourse analysis of GAP II. In Chapter 5, the findings are exposed to critical scrutiny by applying postcolonial feminism. Chapter 6 discusses the results and the conclusions which can be drawn from the analysis, in order to answer the overarching research question.

2 Review of research context

The following chapter situates the study within the academic context and body of literature on gender and development. Firstly, a brief historical review of the main paradigms of gender equality in the field of international development theory and practice is laid out. Secondly, the GAP II framework is described and the rationale for choosing it as the primary source of text addressed and justified. Finally, the chapter discusses the previous research on gender equality in the EU external relations by drawing upon insights and contributions from a number of recent studies in the field.

2.1 Women, gender and development

The inclusion of gender into international development theory and policy evolved at the beginning of the 1970s, in the wake of the agrarian economist Ester Boserup's path-breaking book *Women in Economic Development*. Her study on the gendered effects of development responded critically to the, by then, dominant modernization paradigm, which asserted that the benefits from development processes naturally would reach even the most disadvantageous groups, through so-called “trickle-down-effects” (Momsen, 2010: 11-12). Being the first researcher to use gender as a variable, Boserup demonstrated how development affected the sexual division of labour unequally at different stages in the development process. Her findings and arguments fuelled and justified the intellectual basis of the first distinctive discourse on gender and development; namely the *Women in Development* approach (WID). Fundamental to the approach is the integration of women into development projects with particular emphasis on income-generating activities. Advocates of WID argue that women's status in society and development processes will increase if they enter the “productive” sphere, namely the labour market (Razavi & Miller, 1995: 2-3). This idea can be related to the theoretical underpinnings influenced by modernization theory, which, briefly put, equalizes development with industrialization, and by liberal feminism in favour of methods such as anti-discrimination legislation, free labour markets, education and equal opportunity programmes (Razavi & Miller, 1995: 3). While launching a discussion on the role of women in development, the WID approach has faced critique for being ahistorical, Western-biased and for treating women as a uniform unit of analysis by disregarding the impact of class, race and culture. Moreover, critics highlight the lack of a deeper analysis of the structural discrimination maintained by patriarchal and capitalistic orders as a deficit in its potential to address the root causes to women's subordination (Rathgeber, 1990: 492-493). Another critique brought

forward by neo-Marxist feminists claims that women always have played a critical role in development, both in the private and public sphere. This aspect is foregrounded in the *Women and Development* approach (WAD), commonly understood as the second of the dominant gender and development paradigms. By drawing from dependency theory and referring to class analysis, WAD argues that women's position in society will improve as global structures become more equitable (Rathgeber, 1990: 492-493). Similar to WID, however, WAD tends to ignore differences among women, such as race and ethnicity, as well as the reproductive side of women's lives (Connelly, 2000: 61).

The shift from women to gender followed by the introduction of the *Gender and Development* approach (GAD), elaborated from social feminist thinking in the 1980s. The concept *gender* was introduced in the mid-1970s as socially attributed ideas of femininity and masculinity whereby the GAD enabled for a way of conceiving ideas, values and responsibilities of men and women respectively as changeable and not by nature given (Razavi & Miller, 1995: 13). Fundamentally, GAD directs attention toward the unequal power relations between men and women by integrating gender and class perspectives, rather than placing women as the subject matter of analysis (Saunders, 2012: 7). It further seeks to incorporate the "private sphere" in development practice and policy and emphasizes the role of women as agents, not solely victims. Due to high demand of structural change, however, the GAD approach is rarely seen fully integrated into development policy (Rathgeber, 1990: 494-495) and WID remains hegemonic at the level of feminist development practices (Saunders, 2012: 1). Ultimately, the three approaches have raised women and gender issues to the international development agenda and influenced the evolution of both policy and practice (Jaquette, 2017: 255-256).

2.2 The EU Gender Action Plan II

In September 2015, the European Commission adopted the Joint Staff Working Document *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020*, also referred to as the Gender Action Plan II (GAP II). The policy framework succeeds the previous action plan, in force between 2010-2015, and consolidates the context, rationale and priorities of the EU in terms of achieving gender equality through its external relations. The policy applies to all external relations and policies, with particular emphasis on activities in developing, enlargement and neighbourhood countries. It constitutes the "manifestation of the principles related to gender parity outlined in the new European Consensus on Development" (Ioannides, 2017: 7) and covers all of the Commissions services' and the European External Action Service's actions (EC, 2015a: 2). The academic rationale for examining the discourse in the GAP II framework is based on a number of reasons. Firstly, as indicated above, the GAP II represents a key framework for all EU activities in external relations. It translates into concrete operations and activities, and the discourse therefore concerns a broad spectrum of the EU's political commitments to gender equality. Secondly,

interrogating discourses at the policy-making level can increase the understanding of the EU's actions in practice. Moreover, as GAP II sets the context, principles, and priority areas of gender equality commitments, it provides an adequate representation of the discourse on gender equality. Finally, it constitutes the official EU standpoint, and by being the one in force, it enables an examination of the prevailing discourse in line with the purpose of this study.

2.3 Previous research

The feminist scholarly literature of the EU and gender equality has to a large extent devoted its attention towards the internal policy commitments of the EU (e.g. Lombardo & Meier, 2008; Kantola, 2010, Jaquot, 2015; Bego, 2015). However, with the adoption of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 and the principle of *gender mainstreaming* into all external relations, together with the theoretical conceptualization of “Normative Power Europe” in the beginning of the 2000s, the body of literature has expanded to incorporate gender perspectives in foreign, security and development policy. Yet, as Hanna Muehlenhoff's literature review on gender equality in EU external relations illustrates, the majority of the studies concentrate on the implementation or efficiency of the EU as a gender equality actor, rather than on the gender equality it promotes (Muehlenhoff, 2017: 154). Petra Debausscher's study from 2013, however, represents one exception. She interrogates the discourse of gender mainstreaming in EU development policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa. Her study presents the promotion of gender equality as largely influenced by neoliberal thinking and conceived as a means to achieve other goals, such as economic development, instead of being the goal itself (Debausscher, 2013). In her own critical assessment of the discourse on gender in the EU's security policy on Resolution 1325, Muehlenhoff argues that the EU produces a binary and stereotypical understanding of gender, where women are seen as neoliberal subjects responsible for their own well-being, which consequently undermines the broader structures of gender inequality. Similar to Debausscher's analysis, Muehlenhoff finds that gender equality in EU security policy is constructed as an instrument in order to achieve security and development (Muehlenhoff, 2017).

From a broader academic perspective, a number of scholars have examined the discourse on gender equality with reference to other political actors and institutions, such as the World Bank, OECD, and the UN (e.g. Roberts & Soederberg, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; Eun-kyung, 2012; Puechguirbal, 2010). Inspired by these scholars and the research conducted by Debausscher and Muehlenhoff, as well as intrigued by the somewhat unexplored discourse of gender equality in EU external relations, my intent is to make a contribution to the ongoing discussion on the EU's gender equality regime in external relations.

3 Method and theory

The method and theory undertaken in this study are based on a poststructural approach to policy as discourse elaborated by Carol Bacchi named *What's the problem represented to be?*. Before assessing the premises of the WPR approach, a brief outlook of the ontological and epistemological positions of discourse analysis as theory and method is presented, with particular emphasis on Michel Foucault's notion of discourse and power/knowledge which is central to the analysis. Subsequently, the use of postcolonial feminism is elaborated and discussed. The chapter thereafter concludes with a reflection on the methodological and theoretical implications on the study's validity and reliability.

3.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is based on a structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic philosophy that conceives language as the entry point to reality, or differently put, as a reflection of reality – it attributes the social world with meaning. According to this stance, which is part of a broader social constructivist system of thought, our understanding of the world is created through social interactions and contingent to the context within which it operates. Consequently, there is no predetermined world or objective truth. Rather, the world is given meaning through discursive practices. Language, therefore, has a constitutive dimension as it assigns subjects, objects, identities and social relations with certain significations, and accordingly affects how we perceive them, ourselves and the social world around us (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002: 5-9). This is practiced through discourse which can be understood as “systems of meaning” or communicative patterns produced and reproduced through language. The interpretation of the term discourse is diversified, but a common ground for most of the discourse analytical strands is the idea “language structured according to different patterns that people's utterance follows when they take part in different domains of social life” (ibid: 1). Discourses are dynamic and open to change, but they tend to be viewed as naturalized since people generally perceive them as *the world* and consequently give them *truth status* – rather than seeing them as mere *interpretations* of the world (ibid: 178). For this reason, discourses assign what is right and wrong, true or false, and thus vindicate certain forms of expressions and actions whereas others become dismissed as unthinkable or never considered (ibid: 145). This notion of power in discourse is at the heart of Michel Foucault's ideas and writings. According to Foucault, power perpetuates every social interaction (1980: 119). Therefore, as Bacchi outlines, “we must study how it operates and what it produces, rather than talking about who holds it” (Bacchi,

2009: 38). Discourses produce power in terms of knowledge, which, in turn, sustain and allow the dominance of certain power structures in society.

Yet, the interaction between power and discourse is not unidirectional as discourse can be “an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978: 100-101). Discourse analysis therefore seeks to question the taken-for-granted knowledge and expose it to critical examination in order to unveil the power dynamics inherited in discourse. Doing so, the negative consequences can be uncovered which, in turn, may embark opportunities for social change (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002: 145).

3.2 Policy-as-discourse: What’s the problem represented to be?

The *What’s the problem represented to be?* approach developed by Carol Bacchi builds on Foucault's notion of discourse and power, and seeks to question the idea of policy problems as fixed and policy-making as a practice of problem-solving. Instead, Bacchi elaborates on a mode of thinking of *policy-as-discourse*, which emphasizes that the construction of policy problems constitutes an integral part of the policy process. Drawing on social constructivist and poststructural premises, the approach rejects the idea that governments act upon problems that exist in the real and beyond their own perceptions of the social world (Bacchi, 2009: 34). Instead, governments produce and give shape to problems “as a particular sort of problems” by attributing them with meaning in the prescribed responses to them (Bacchi, 2000: 48).

The WPR approach focuses primarily on the meaning production from governments or other actors with rule-making power, as Bacchi resonates that they embody a privileged position in society. Through governing practices such as legislation, their understanding of problems “stick” and, consequently, “take on a life of their own” (Bacchi, 2009: 33). Subsequently, policy discourses have real and material impacts as they affect both how problems are perceived, but also evoke how people are to think about themselves and others (Bacchi, 2009: 1).

“In this view, the ‘public’, of which we are members, is governed, not through policies, but through problematizations - how ‘problems’ are constituted” (Bacchi, 2012: 22)

In order to understand how we are governed, we must analyse and examine the problem representations that policies generate (Bacchi, 2009: xii). Bacchi defines the term *problem representations* as the “implicit and explicit diagnosis of ‘the problem’ found in every policy or solution proposal” (Bacchi, 1999: 3). In essence, the objective of the WPR approach is to discern and critically assess the discourse of a certain policy problem by identifying the underlying presuppositions and assumptions which support and legitimize it, but also through an interrogation of

silences, taken-for-granted knowledge and subject positions. In the following section, I will lay out the structure of the approach and how it will serve as an analytical framework for the analysis of the GAP II framework.

3.2.1 Structure of the analysis

The WPR approach presents six questions which allow for an in-depth and systematic examination of the understanding of gender equality in the GAP II framework. Although gender equality is the goal rather than the problem, Bacchi underlines that the same logic still applies, by referring to Alessandra Tanesini's view of concepts as "proposals about how we ought to proceed from here" (1994: 207). Thus, by examining the issues, problems and solutions that the GAP II aims to address, the WPR approach enables for an analysis of the meaning attributed to gender equality. The following questions make up for the WPR approach:

1. What is the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

(Bacchi, 2009: 2).

The first question of the WPR approach aims to identify how the problem is represented by working backward from the proposed solutions to the understanding of the causes to the problem (**Q1**). The aim of the second question is to unveil the conceptual logic that underpins a certain problem representation, which Bacchi specifies as "the meaning that must be in place for a problem to appear as coherent and reasonable" (Bacchi, 2009: 5). This step includes examining the knowledge that is taken-for-granted but also binaries, key concepts and categories which enable for an understanding of how the discourse is legitimized (ibid: 35). The third question concerns the origin, history, and mechanisms that have brought the discourse of the problem representation into being (**Q3**). The critical dimension of the WPR approach is developed in the three following questions. Question number four addresses the silences and limits, or shortages, of a certain representation (**Q4**) (ibid: 10-13). Additionally, question number five considers the effects of the problem representation based on the premise that discourses impact different groups in the society unevenly (**Q5**). According to Bacchi, it is possible to distinguish three types of effects. Firstly, effects can be *discursive* as they set the boundaries for what can be said, thought and done. Secondly, discourses affect how subjects and subjectivities are created

as they make certain subject positions available. Hence, how we perceive ourselves is partly a result of the subject positions made available in public policies. This aspect is defined as *subjectification* effects. Finally, effects can be material and impact people's lives differently. Therefore, Bacchi draws attention to the *lived* effects of a certain problem representation (ibid: 14-16). The final question of the WPR aims to identify the practices, processes, and means which alter the domination of a certain problem representation (**Q6**) (ibid: 19).

In *Analysing Policy*, Bacchi explains that the approach is not to be seen as a strict formula, nor is it necessary to address each of the questions. Rather, "the point of the analysis will determine which questions are foregrounded" (ibid: 101). In this study, question number three and six have been left out from the analysis as I am not aiming to identify how the prevailing discourse of gender equality has emerged or gained dominance. I will rather focus on the prevailing discourse of gender equality as well as interrogate the effects it entails.

3.3 Postcolonial feminism

The poststructural notion of power and discourse as inseparable can be found at the core of the postcolonial feminist project. In view of knowledge, both historically and contemporary, as largely produced and controlled by western societies, postcolonial feminism seeks to "disrupt the power to name, represent and theorize by challenging western arrogance and ethnocentrism" (McEwan, 2001: 100). The postcolonial feminist literature represents a critical stance within both policy and practice on issues of women, gender and development. These include, among several others, the scholars Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sandra Harding and Cheryl McEwan, whose contributions and thoughts will be applied as a theoretical lens to the findings of the discourse analysis in order to broaden the reflections.

Postcolonial feminism does not reflect a monolithic body of theory, but rather encompasses a range of scholars who seek to challenge the global power structures of the colonial heritage as well as to account for its effects on gender issues (de los Reyes, 2011: 21). Postcolonial feminism is rooted in both postcolonial and feminist thought but in opposition to the gender-blindness of the postcolonial strand of thinking and the Eurocentric orientation of western feminism. A common ground to postcolonial feminist scholars can be traced to the critique towards the universalization of women's experiences; a discourse commonly imposed by western feminism. In contrast, postcolonial feminism strives to acknowledge how multiple social factors such as race, culture and class, interact and differ women's oppression, experiences and desires from one another (Lewis & Mills, 2003: 9). By questioning the hegemony of western feminism and the dominant power relations between the Global North and Global South, postcolonial feminists aim to contribute with alternative perspectives and knowledge in order to recapitalize the understanding of the world (de los Reyes, 2011: 20). Differently put, as Harding suggests, postcolonial feminists "intend to 'gaze back' at Western imperialism and global male supremacy" (Harding, 2008: 156).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty represents one of the front figures of the postcolonial feminist movement. In her study *Under the Western Eye*, Mohanty argues that western literature has established a discourse that depicts women as a homogenous group at the exposure of a universal oppression (Mohanty, 2003: 53). Mohanty asserts that this ahistorical perspective of western feminism creates the *third world woman* - a victim of male violence. This portrayal, she argues, inhabits a power dynamic that reduces women's subordination to western feminist premises.

"The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally" (Mohanty, 2003: 52).

The understanding of women as a coherent group, in turn, implies that "sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination and power is automatically defined in binary terms" (ibid: 31). As a consequence, women are conceived as exposed to the same male violence everywhere and associated to as *powerless victims* without agency, while men, on the other hand, become *subjects-who-perpetrate-violence* and hence in possession of power (ibid: 55). By referring to male superiority as the primary source of oppression, other forms of intersecting inequalities that operate within gender oppression are neglected and ignored (McEwan, 2001: 98).

Mohanty conceptualizes how concepts such as *reproduction*, *the sexual division of labour* and *the household* are used as if universally applicable by introducing the analytical concept *methodological universalism* (Mohanty, 2003: 33-34). Cheryl McEwan exemplifies its application by referring to the western notion of the private/public dichotomy. Within western feminist critique, the private sphere is conceived as apolitical and excluded from social development (2001: 98). Yet, gender relations are not historically static, as they "constantly shape and are shaped by other cultural relations" (Harding, 2008: 113). Assuming that the Western perception of the world is *natural* or *desirable* creates what Mohanty defines as a *colonialist move* which gives western values, knowledge, and power a hegemonic status.

In *Sciences from Below*, Harding elaborates on this thinking and brings to light how the dominance of Western understandings of modernity assumes a global power relation where ideas of social progress only can be rationally transferred from the North to the South (Harding, 2008: 173-175). Seeing that modernity is always an oppositional term, and thus that it comes into being through its opposed "other", it results in a dichotomy between the modern/traditional aligned to western premises. While Western knowledge is not problematic *per se*, Harding outlines that the false impression of it as *universal* has resulted in "discriminatory against the majority of the world's citizens" (ibid: 216). She therefore presents a "project of rethinking modernity" (ibid: 74) in which she aims to correct what she conceptualizes as the male supremacist and Eurocentric understanding of development. (ibid: 193). In this regard, postcolonial feminism challenges the notion of a single path to development and demands acknowledgement of a

diversity of perspectives and priorities. Central to the approach, therefore, is an aim to highlight differences in tradition, beliefs, personality, culture and engage in a critical interrogation and destabilization of dominant discourses (McEwan, 2001: 95-99).

3.4 Material

The study is delimited to study the prevailing discourse as written text at the policy-making stage of the EU. The Joint Staff Working Document *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020* is the primary text subjected to analysis. In addition, and in accordance with Bacchi's recommendations (2009: 20), related documents are also examined as a way of achieving a more insightful representation of the discourse. This material includes the Annual Implementation Reports from 2016 and 2017 issued by the European Commission (EC), as well as related Council Conclusions (CC). Moreover, *the EU Fact Sheet on the new framework for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, as well as the press release on GAP II issued by the European Commission, are also considered.

3.5 Methodological and theoretical considerations

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, social constructivism approaches knowledge production as a mere reflection of reality elaborated through discourse. This study is therefore to be seen as an interpretative one influenced by my situated knowledge, whereby subjectivity constitutes an inherent part of the research process. The positivist aspirations of objectivity are, however, dismissed as unachievable and irrelevant (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002: 175). Instead, the aim of this study, as with discourse analysis in general, is to question the taken-for-granted understanding of the world and to enable for new ways of thinking to emerge (ibid: 21). Further, the study is to be construed in conformity with Donna Haraway's approach to science and feminism captured in the following quote:

“Feminists don't need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence. [...]. We need the power of modern critical theories of how meaning and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life” (Haraway, 1988: 579-580).

Withal, I will shortly address the methodological and theoretical implications of the chosen method and theory. In discourse analysis, as Paul James Gee formulates it, “the analyst interprets his or her data in a certain way and those data so interpreted, in turn, render the analysis meaningful in a certain way and not

others” (2005: 113). This does not imply that the interpretations are unimportant, but the scientific demands of validity and reliability are troublesome. While the result inevitably will be contingent on the research strategy, Gee underscores that the validity of discourse analysis can be examined by assessing how the material is rendered meaningful (ibid). Taking this into account, I will clearly demonstrate the steps that have been undertaken in the analysis and substantiate my findings with examples from the material.

Furthermore, I am aware that my positioning as a white university student from the Global North will impose restrictions on what I can discern and critically examine since my knowledge is encapsulated within the same historical, cultural and socio-political context as the discourse under examination. However, as Haraway suggests, it is not identity that produces science, whilst acknowledging that there is no way of being “simultaneously in all, or wholly, in any of the privileged positions structured by gender, race, nations and class”. Instead, she proposes, critical position in terms of partial objectivity define science (ibid). Partial objectivity is achieved by reflecting upon one’s own situatedness as it creates “responsibility for our enabling practices” (Haraway, 1988: 583). Doing so, the researcher is able to talk about the partial reality with authority in a democratic and ethical way (ibid: 586-587).

Finally, it should be stressed that the choice of postcolonial feminist theory will shape my analysis since theory can be understood as a “set of concepts used to define and/or explain some phenomenon” (Silverman, 2005: 98). The study should therefore not be confused as an attempt to produce universal generalizations or objective truths.

4 Discourse analysis

The analysis is divided into two chapters, whereby this chapter is devoted to the analysis of the discourse. The discourse analysis has been conducted by a close and systematic reading of the material guided by the four selected questions of the WPR approach. Accordingly, in order to identify how gender equality is constructed, related concepts, binaries and underlying arguments have been distinguished. In the subsequent chapter, the findings will be subjected to critical scrutiny by applying postcolonial feminism. In this vein, the effects yielded by the discourse will be elaborated and discussed.

4.1 The representation of gender (in)equality

The analysis begins with an examination of how gender equality is attributed with meaning by inquiring the issue areas that the GAP II seeks to address. As highlighted by Bacchi, “it is equally true to say that looking at what is proposed as a policy intervention will reveal how the issue is being thought about” (Bacchi, 1990: 2-3). By asking the first of the WPR approach question, four overarching problem representations of gender (in)equality have been identified:

- gender-based discrimination against women and girls
- women’s absence in public decision-making
- women’s lack of participation in the economy
- women’s lack of access to resources

The discrimination women and girls face due to the fact that they are women and girls is a cross-cutting problem representation outlaid to obstruct the full realization of gender equality. GAP II raises issues such as violence against women and girls, poverty, and highlight “harmful practices” that devalue or neglect women and girls the fulfilment of their rights as obstacles to gender equality (EC, 2015a: 3). These are construed as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage, trafficking and son preference along with Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (e.g. *ibid* 26; EC, 2015c: 1-2, EC, 2017: 109). Two subsequent problem representations can be extracted as embedded in this problem representation. Namely, “social and cultural norms and values”, as well as “gender stereotypes” (EC 2015a: 6; 10; 36). VAWG is set out as a “pervasive human rights violation” understood as rooted in “deeply ingrained social and cultural norms”. GAP II also articulates that “gender stereotypes that disadvantage girls and women are a serious obstacle to gender equality” where “certain conceptions of masculinity

put boys and men at risk of living a life of violence (as victims and/or perpetrators)” (ibid: 6). The second closely intertwined, yet distinct, problem representation addresses the absence of women in public decision-making at different levels of society and purports that, in order for gender equality to be achieved, women’s voice and participation needs to be strengthened. Women are seen to participate less in formal politics in comparison to men; at all levels of society and in particular at the upper echelons of government (e.g. ibid: 9; 35). In this vein, gender equality is related to an issue of equal representation. The third problem representation relates to the issue of women’s lack of participation in the economy, whereby gender inequality is construed as a matter of women’s absence in income-generating activities (ibid: 7). Women’s time spent on unpaid labour is nested in this problematization (ibid: 8). The fourth problem representation takes hold of gender inequality in terms of women’s lack of access to resources such as “quality education, vocational training, information, clean water, and public services” (EC, 2018: 2; see also, e.g. EC 2015a: 8). Legislation that disregards women the right to own property is construed as an underlying root cause (EC, 2015a: 10).

4.2 Legitimizing gender equality

In the following section, the conceptual premises that substantiate the four identified problem representations of gender (in)equality are examined. This has been done by analysing the underlying argumentation on the basis of key concepts, categories, and binaries (Bacchi, 2009: 7-9). Through engagement with the material, the link between concepts, binaries and categories appeared as interwoven and I have therefore chosen to structure the analysis based on three key aspects of the discourse.

4.2.1 A women’s issue

Within policies, categories are “deployed to produce specific problem representations” (Bacchi, 1999: 164). Considering the identity categories operating within the GAP II framework, women and girls are preponderantly attributed as the subject matters, and accordingly, those attached to political action relative to gender equality. While gender equality is acknowledged as a state of affairs between men and women (EC, 2015a: 2), men and boys are notably absent in the material. In the objectives where men and boys are mentioned, it is in connotations with terminology such as “support the active involvement”, “engage men and boys” or “promote their active and meaningful role” (e.g. ibid: 26-27; 36; EC, 2018: 7). Yet, no explicit measures are directed towards men or boys. Hence, men are ascribed as passive sub-players, as participants, within the solutions to attain gender equality. In view of Bacchi’s understanding of categories as meaning creators to the problem representations (2009: 9) men and boys are set apart from the problems related to gender inequality. Instead, gender inequality is understood as an issue affecting,

and concerning, women and girls. Built into this conceptual logic is the binary between men/women. GAP II predominantly prescribed women and girls in relation to men and boys. They are “less likely”, “have less”, “participate less” and are “systematically left behind” in relation to men (e.g. EC, 2015a: 3; 7; 9). As a result, women are defined by their relation to men which injects an image of men as the norm without the requirement to change for gender equality to be achieved. Seeing that “binaries reflect hierarchy, whereby one side is privileged at the expense of the other, which is perceived to be less desirable” (Bacchi, 2009: 7), men and boys are assigned a hegemonic status while women and girls are in need of transformation on the premises attached to this ideal.

4.2.2 A human right and instrumental incentive

A key concept that underscores the idea of gender equality is *human rights*, understood as a fundamental value with clear moral and ethical implications associated with it. Closely connected to this concept is the contention of “every individual’s ability to fulfil their potential” (EC, 2015a: 4), as well as the ability of women and girls to “have and retain choices and control over their own bodies” (ibid: 6). Further, this feature of the discourse emphasizes “the fulfilment of economic and social rights of women and girls” (ibid: 7). In this vein, gender equality is given a rights dimension based on ideas of equal treatment, participation, and access to resources (see also, EC, 2018: 5; EC, 2017: 2). From this follows that gender equality is considered an instinct target and a ground principle applying to all human beings. At the same time, the inherited value of gender equality is ensured by an instrumental incentive according to which gender equality is constructed as a means to achieve, and accelerate, other already presumed societal goals. These goals include poverty reduction, economic growth, democracy and good governance practices (e.g EC, 2015a: 2; 4; 7; 9; EC, 2015c: 1). Hence, gender equality is underpinned and justified by an instrumental value. In the EU Fact Sheet, it is stipulated that “gender equality is not just a matter of social justice, but also one of ‘smart economics’” (EC, 2015b: 1). While the accentuation on gender equality as an ultimate goal is prominent, there is a recurrent tendency in the material to rationalize *gender equality as a human right* in light of its economic benefits. Gender equality and girls’ and women’s empowerment are prescribed as “part of the formula”, “an ingredient” as well as a “driver” of economic growth and sustainable development (EC, 2015a: 4, CC, 2015: 2). In this regard, the instrumental incentive precedes the fundamental value of gender equality. The following quote exemplifies this inclination:

“Ensuring that girls and women are empowered, that their economic and social rights are fulfilled and that an enabling environment for their fair and active participation exist are key priorities for the EU. Such an objective *will* contribute to faster growing economies, *whilst* preventing human rights exploitation.” (EC, 2015a: 7).

As accentuated in the sentence structure, economic growth becomes the focal point of women and girls' empowerment, whereas the human rights dimension is treated as a side effect. This dynamic is also identifiable in the perception of the economy as the arena for change. As an example, GAP II states that: "Issues such as reconciliation between family and work are crucial to *unlock* women's economic potential and contribution to development" (ibid: 7). It unravels a hierarchical binary conception of the public/private sphere as well as the modern/traditional. Implying that women are locked into the private sphere gives the public, and hence the economy, the status as the accurate and unique field for development. The private sphere is conceived as a hindrance to women's liberty and freedom as well as to her contribution to social progress. Women are bounded as traditional, while men, seen to belong to the public, are preconceived as modern.

4.2.3 Gender: a social and biological fact

While GAP II commonly refers to methods such as *gender-sensitive analysis* and *gender mainstreaming*, the understanding of gender is not explicitly pronounced in the material. Once, masculinity/femininity is construed as a social construct (EC, 2015a, 36) but the imminent interconnection between gender and women throughout the material establishes a perception of gender equality as both purposive towards the sake of women, as well as implicitly reserved towards action applied to women. Gender is often used as a static category, rather than discussed in transformative or relational terms, which implies a notion of gender as attached to biological sex. The tendency to confine gender as a set of characteristics based on biological grounds is noticeable in the categorization of women. For instance, GAP II suggests that:

'When more women are elected to public office, policy-making increasingly reflects the priorities of *families, women and excluded groups* (ibid: 10).

Similarly, women's inclusion in public decision-making is substantiated with reference to their contribution to more "inclusive, balanced and represented societies (ibid: 9) as well as to more peaceful and prosperous communities (ibid: 10, EC, 2015b; 1). According to this rhetoric, gender is construed as a primary qualifier for women's characteristics and skills, as well as the basic premise for the affinity between all women. Briefly stated, female embodiment is inscribed as representative for women's interests.

5 Analysis of effects

Departing from the findings of the discourse analysis, the following chapter critically examines the *discursive*, *subjectification* and *lived* effects through the theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism. The chapter also addresses question number four of the WPR approach, seeing that silences, like language, set barriers to what may be said, thought or acted upon. The analysis is structured according to four thematic issue areas which inherently treats the categories of effects proposed by Bacchi.

5.1 Women as one (leaving other women behind)

As the discourse analysis has unveiled, the GAP II emphasizes women and girls as subject matters relative to gender (in)equality. Women are to transform to a male ideal. This rhetoric builds on a binary between men/women which divides power into two polarities. By categorising women in relation to men, Mohanty argues, women are ascribed as powerless whereas men function as the root cause to women's oppression (Mohanty, 2003: 114). In other words, as McEwan formulates it, power dynamics are positioned in terms of "whole peoples – wholes coming into the exploitative relations" (2001: 98). Although GAP II adverts that the "roots of gender-based discrimination and inequality are reinforced when intersected by other forms of inequality based on race, ethnicity, caste, age, ability, religion and gender identity, etc." (EC, 2017: 9), gender is conceived as the primary element of identity (see also, e.g. EC, 2015a: 3-4). Accordingly, being women is set out as the main source of oppression. This illuminates what Mohanty describe as the false projection of a *universal sisterhood* grounded on an idea of shared struggles, experiences and desires among women worldwide. Yet, women's needs are often in conflict with each other, both within and in between the Global South and North (Harding, 2008: 157). Through assuming women as one, GAP II universalise the existence and complexities of women's lives while, as Mohanty argues: "No one 'becomes a woman' purely because she is female." (Mohanty, 2003: 55) but rather through a "complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks" (ibid: 30).

According to Mohanty, the use of women as a "stable category of analysis" is not only incorrect, but also problematic, as it assumes a "ahistorical unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination" (ibid: 31). Moreover, it gives rise to a perception of gender or sexual difference as universally applicable (ibid: 21), whilst it is bounded to contextual premises (Harding, 2008: 110). The universalisation of women in GAP II therefore reinforces the binary division

between men and women which leaves the unequal power relations within and between social groups unexamined. It also silences the experiences of women in the third world. Against this background, GAP II may be ineffectual in its efforts to eliminate oppression (Mohanty, 2003: 31). The next section builds on this argument and further assesses how the binary between men/women, along with the public/private and the modern/traditional, discursively produces an understanding of the patriarchal order based on western premises.

5.2 The patriarchy: one size fits all?

As outlined above, the binary use of gender along with the universalization of women give rise to a perception of gender inequality which purports male dominance as the root cause to women's subordination. Combined with the dichotomies between the public/private and the modern/traditional, this foregrounds for a Western-biased model of the patriarchy as if universally correct. The rhetorical claim of women to "bear the burden" (CC, 2018: 2) of household duties inhibits an assumption of the private domain as a site of subordination (McEwan, 2001: 98). Further, by considering women's economic potential and contributions as unlocked, GAP II undertakes a logic which implies that the private sphere exists separately from development. Given the hegemonic alignment on the public sphere, women's work is represented as apolitical and traditional, in comparison to men, seen to belong to the public, who are set out as modern. This resonates with Harding's argument that "women are consistently represented as outside history and society" and projected as "primitive, incomplete and immature forms of the human" (Harding, 2008: 209). Through pre-existent notions of what is to be considered political and economic activities, GAP II disregards the societal contributions made by women, while consolidating men and the market as the norm to strive for. Although gender relations are hierarchically structured, they are not equally organized in every society (ibid, 111). This, however, is bypassed in the GAP II. As a consequence, societies where the "private realm does not exist separately from the public one, but that both domains are needed and political" (McEwan, 2001: 98) are neglected. The ignorance of culturally, historically and socially specific connotations of gender relations in GAP II expresses traits of what Mohanty defines as a *colonialist move* and thus an exercise of power to define the *natural* or *desirable*, which consequently maintains the existent power dynamics between the Global South and the Global North (Mohanty, 2003: 41-42). It also reinforces the understanding of knowledge as exclusively transferable from the West (Harding, 2008: 175). Additionally, if the idea of the private sphere as apolitical takes root in places which prior to EU cooperation have been governed by another logic, it furthers a possibility of women being deprived of their existing social status, rather than the inverse.

5.3 Woman: victim, and a resource

By mirroring women in the third world through a Western-biased model of the patriarchy, and setting out women as traditional, GAP II discursively reproduces what Mohanty addresses as the image of the “average third world woman”. Drawing from the underlying premises of the West, and thus the western woman, as the appropriate model for women around the globe (Harding, 2008: 192), women in the third world are understood as passive victims without agency to generate change from within. In GAP II, women are prescribed with “little voice”, “no control” and asserted as “trafficked, enslaved and even sold as merchandise” in a general notion (EC, 2015a: 3). The household is conceived as a site of her subordination. By portraying women based on ideas of an “imagined free liberal democracy”, women in the third world are “fixed in time, space and history” (Mohanty, 2003: 49). They are victimized in relation to an imagined first world woman who stands for liberation and intellectual superiority. While, as Mohanty argues, categories “must be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life” (ibid: 53), GAP II discursively colonializes the experiences, priorities and desires of third world women and societies (ibid: 41).

Interestingly, however, GAP II also inherits a representation of women as resources in parallel to the subjectification of women as victims. This attribute of the discourse is bound to the instrumental incentive of gender equality. As an example, GAP II purports that women’s participation in the public sphere can “lessen corruption” and “contribute to faster growing economies and sustainable development” (EC, 2015a: 7; 10). Additionally, women and girls’ empowerment is conceived as “part of the formula”, as well as a “driver of development that addresses poverty, reduces inequalities and improves development outcomes” (ibid: 4). While this credits women with an essential role in society, it may lead to a situation where gender equality and women are reduced to a means to other presumed goals (Baden & Goetz, 2000: 23-24). Furthermore, placing women in a toolbox used for other societal achievements, while failing to address the gendered nature of institutions, may overestimate what women are capable of in a “global order characterized by an on-going gender bias (Chant & Sweetman, 2012: 523). To draw an example, GAP II recognizes that women spend “at least twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work” (EC, 2015a: 8), but does not address any concrete action relative to men in order to equalize the gendered relation of domestic work. Then, how would women be able to take care of the household, enter gender-biased governmental structures – and at the same time, lessen corruption? Rather, there is a risk that women commit to an even greater burden of workload.

5.4 Reproducing gender stereotypes

While GAP II aims to achieve: “Challenged and changed discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes” (EC, 2015: 36), the discourse analysis has identified a contradictory logic in the causal thinking of women as resources to achieve more peace, development and prosperity. As a matter of fact, it illuminates an essentialist perception of gender as attached to biological sex. Women’s skills, characteristics and interests are understood on the basis of their gender, which is prescribed as *feminine*. As Harding argues, masculinity and femininity are not attached to sex differences in “fixed, discrete or universal ways” (2008: 110). Yet, by associating gender qualities to the female body, GAP II sets out identity as either man/woman, male/female and masculine/feminine (Mohanty, 2003: 108). Moreover, women are connected to an archetypical view of women as peaceful and family-oriented, which produces what Sylvia Chant and Caroline Sweetman outlines as a stereotypical understanding of “’male egoism’ and ’irresponsibility’” versus female “’altruism’ and ’self-sacrifice’” (Chant & Sweetman, 2012: 524). As a consequence, by projecting expectation of women’s behaviour in view of gender, GAP II discursively reproduces gender stereotypes and an understanding of gender as a two-sided system.

6 Concluding remarks

6.1 Discussion

The discourse analysis has revealed that the understanding of gender equality in the GAP II framework is substantiated by a dual conceptual logic. On the one hand, gender equality is construed as a fundamental value attached to the idea of human rights. On the other, it is designated as a prerequisite for the achievement of a set of presumed societal goals. As elucidated, there is a recurrence in the GAP II to position the instrumental incentive as a qualifier to the instinct value attached to the concept. This may potentially reduce gender equality as a mere opening to achieve other objectives (Baden & Goetz, 2000: 23-24). Additionally, it discursively harmonizes gender equality with Western-biased envisions of development. In the eyes of postcolonial and postmodern development feminists, this hegemonic trait of the discourse could displace and undermine the feminist aspirations for a transformative global gender agenda (e.g. Baden & Goetz, 2000; Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Kabeer, 2005).

Further, the analysis has shown that GAP II foregrounds an understanding of gender (in)equality based on Western premises. The binary notion of men and women simplifies a complex interaction of power structures into two polarities where women are viewed as powerless victims of male domination. While, as Mohanty argues, “it is in the intersections on the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality and nation” one is positioned as women (2003: 13), GAP II permeates an understanding of women as universal. This does not only result in a situation where the struggles, experiences and priorities of third world women are silenced (Mohanty, 2003), but also leave the unequal power relations within and between social groups unchallenged. As a consequence, GAP II may not result in effective or adequate strategies on the ground.

Subsequently, by contrasting women’s lives to a prototype elaborated from a white, western women’s experiences, women in the third world are by necessity understood as oppressed and victimized. The public sphere is ascribed as the site and solution to her emancipation. This illuminates what Mohanty defines as *colonialist move*, which reproduces an imaginary of the “average third world women” as tradition-bound and passive (Mohanty, 2003). In addition, the preconceived notion of what is to be considered economic and political activity generates a status quo which separates women from societal contributions and development. The lack of attentiveness to contextual differences reproduces a sustenance of the West as the superior referent for social progress and modernity. Potentially, the exportation of the Western-biased ideas of women’s subordination, and the solutions to her emancipation, could lead to a devaluation of the social status

of women in the third world, rather than the inverse. In such a case, GAP II's strategies for increased gender equality would be counterproductive.

Looking how subjects are constructed, women are, like in Muelenhoff's (2017) study, portrayed as both victims and resources. While the latter representation account women with a certain degree of agency and importance, the analysis has shown that the understanding of women as resources is endorsed by a contradictory logic. Not only is women's equal participation *needed* to be rationalised, the justification displays an essentialist notion of gender as attached to biological sex. Women are conceived as more peaceful and family-oriented, which reinforces the binary understanding of gender as either feminine/masculine. In addition, the binary notion of gender as rooted in either male/female bodies overlooks the gendered nature of social institutions and structures. Hence, there is no guarantee that women's participation in the public sphere will lead to a representation of all women. Neither is it a warranty of transformed power relations (Kabeer, 2005: 23-24). As Harding emphasizes: "Even demands for equal participation and employment requires widespread and deep transformations of social relations" (Harding, 2008: 110). By leaving men and structural relations of power out of the picture, while proclaiming women as both the problems and the solutions to gender (in)equality, GAP II may result in ineffective strategies to eliminate the unequal power relations (Debausscher, 2003: 42).

While GAP II does acknowledge that masculinity/femininity are social constructs, the emphasis on women showcase a lack of the gender perspective issued by the GAD approach. The focal point on women's access to educational programs, employment and public services demonstrates uniformity with the WID approach. Nonetheless, GAP II articulate a need for legislative changes which illuminates a dimension of structural analysis of inequality in line with GAD. However, and as opposed to the WAD approach, it maintains the view of third world women as outside development due to the separation of the private sphere from what is advised as economic and political activities.

Before moving on to the conclusion, I would like to bring to mind that the findings are contingent to the research strategy undertaken in this study. While the results are by no means unavailing for this reason, they are not to be confused as a claim of objective knowledge. Rather, the purpose has been to analyse the meaning attributed to gender equality in the GAP II and to assess the effects imposed by this understanding of the concept through the theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism. Doing so, I have altered for a theoretically grounded analysis of the construction of gender equality and contributed with a critical reflection on the GAP II framework. Additionally, postcolonial feminism has raised the need to consider contextual premises in the elaboration of both policy and practice on gender and development.

6.2 Conclusion and prospect

This study departed from the contention that the EU has power to define the normal in international relations. Further, it set out that the discourse on gender equality in

EU external relations remains rather unexplored. Against this background, the study has sought to discern the understanding of gender equality in the EU Gender Action Plan II and critically assess the effects of this understanding of the concept through the theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism.

Guided by the four selected questions of the WPR approach, the study has identified the GAP II framework's construction of gender equality as an issue of women's inequality in terms of gender-based discrimination against women and girls, women's absence in decision-making, women's lack of participation in the economy and women's lack of access to resources. In addition, the study has revealed that the discourse is substantiated by a fundamental value which prescribes gender equality to moral and ethical dimensions. Simultaneously, gender equality is construed as an instrumental incentive and as a means to achieve other presumed societal goals. Furthermore, the study has discerned that the discourse is settled in a dichotomy between men/women according to which women are expected to adapt to a male norm. Men, on the other hand, are attributed as passive sub-players within the solutions to achieve gender equality. The view of women as both victims of male domination and the solutions to gender equality may result in ineffective strategies to change the unequal power relations between men and women.

As the analysis has illuminated, the binary notion of gender in GAP II, together with the dichotomies between the public/private and the modern/traditional, reproduces an understanding of gender (in)equality mirrored through a Western model of the patriarchy. As a result, women's struggles, experiences and desires are universalized which leads to a reproduction of the "average third world women" as oppressed and traditional in view of the Western perceptions of "modernity". Consequently, the voices of third world women are silenced. Moreover, by conceiving gender as the main source of women's oppression, GAP II leaves the unequal power relationships between and within social groups unchallenged. This may result in strategies which fails to address the root causes of women's inequality appropriately. Possibly, the approach to gender relations as universal could yield an export of ideas of what is to be labelled as "oppressive" or "degrading" activities in women's lives and thus potentially lead to counterproductive achievements. This, in turn, illuminates the sustenance of the global power dynamics between the Global South and the North.

The contribution of postcolonial feminism highlights the importance of incorporating local perspectives in the elaboration of transnational gender equality strategies. Drawing from the findings brought to light by the analysis, it would be of value to further analyse the effects of the discourse in a grassroots setting as it could allow for a more grounded understanding of the material consequences imposed by the discourse. GAP II could also serve as a prominent source to examine the understanding of gender in EU external relations, which would be of essence to scrutinize more profoundly. Finally, in a call for future academic enquiry, there is a need to advance the discussion on how to design transnational gender equality policy and practice without labelling women as one.

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