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in the European Union and  
the Utility of Qualitative  
Network Analysis**

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# Gender Equality Policy Networks in the European Union and the Utility of Qualitative Network Analysis

Petra Ahrens

Geschlechtergleichstellungspolitik als Querschnittsaufgabe ist seit den neunziger Jahren in den EU-Verträgen fest verankert. Die damit verbundene Zunahme von Akteuren mit unterschiedlichen Zuständigkeiten und Einflussmöglichkeiten führte zu neuen Verbindungen und änderte damit das bisher existierende Politiknetzwerk. Unklar bleibt dabei, wie diese Verbindungen und Beziehungen konkret auf formaler und informeller Ebene aussehen. Existieren überhaupt Politiknetzwerke und wie sind sie aufgebaut? Arbeiten politische Institutionen und Nichtregierungsorganisationen auf formaler und informeller Ebene in ähnlicher Weise zusammen?

Ziel dieses Working Papers ist es, zu diskutieren, inwiefern Qualitative Netzwerkanalyse (QNA) als innovative Methode dazu beitragen kann, formale und informelle gleichstellungspolitische Netzwerke in der Europäischen Union zu erfassen. Im ersten Teil werden aktuelle Ergebnisse und Forschungsansätze zu gleichstellungspolitischen Netzwerken vorgestellt und diskutiert. Zusätzlich wird die Methode der konzentrischen Kreise – ein Instrument der Qualitativen Netzwerkanalyse – als alternativer Ansatz eingeführt und dann dargestellt, wie bisherige Forschung damit sinnvoll ergänzt werden kann. Daran anknüpfend wird die Forschungsmethode im zweiten Teil detaillierter erläutert und erste Ergebnisse des zugrundeliegenden Forschungsprojektes zum „Fahrplan für die Gleichstellung von Frauen und Männern 2006-2010“ präsentiert.

**Schlagwörter:** Gleichstellungspolitische Netzwerke; Qualitative Netzwerkanalyse; Europäische Union; Frauenbewegung; Multilevel Governance

Gender equality policy has been firmly included in the EU treaties as a cross-sectional task since the mid-1990s. New actors have emerged with different responsibilities and level of power, establishing new ties and thereby a changing policy network among existing actors. Nevertheless, what still remain unclear are exactly these connections and relations among formal and informal actors and their networks. Do gender equality policy networks exist and what do they look like? Do governmental and nongovernmental actors cooperate formally as well as informally in a similar way?

The aim of this working paper is to discuss Qualitative Network Analysis (QNA) as a fresh approach to gather information on formal and informal gender equality policy networks in the European Union. In the first section, I synthesise current research on EU gender equality policy networks and discuss the advantages of the research approaches chosen. In addition, I propose the method of concentric circles, a tool of QNA, as an alternative methodology and argue that it offers possibilities to complement existing results. In the second section, I illustrate the methodology in detail and present first results of my empirical study about the European Union's gender equality policy program, the 'Roadmap to equality between men and women 2006-2010'.

**Key words:** gender equality policy networks; Qualitative Network Analysis; European Union; women's movements; multilevel governance

## 1. Introduction

Knowledge of formal and informal policy networks has a great importance for a better understanding of multilevel governance in the European Union. A crucial characteristic of political systems in general and of multilevel governance in the European Union in particular is the coexistence and interdependence of formal and informal forms of governance. Formal governing follows certain formal rules and processes and includes certain institutions at certain points in time. These rules, processes and institutions are legally binding and transparent to all participants. In addition, informal ways of governing are a standard characteristic of all forms of government. Informal ways are not necessarily hidden, yet rules for processes, membership and responsibilities are often not clearly defined. Informal governance includes, for example, specific working or expert groups that discuss future legislation, policy programs or comparable elements of the formal level. It often also includes the participation of nongovernmental actors like lobby groups, social partners or companies. With regard to the EU, this becomes especially influential, because current informal procedures may turn into formal ones in the future. This has already been the case for the comitology or the permission for social partners to adopt agreements that become official legislation of the EU afterwards (Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch 2003).

The importance of establishing a distinction between formal and informal governance becomes particularly essential for horizontal policy fields like gender equality or environmental policy, since these connect and permeate policy fields, which are normally separated. However, with regard to recently established interinstitutional groups in gender equality policy, it remains uncertain whether to indicate them as formal or informal. Do governmental and nongovernmental actors cooperate formally as well as informally in a similar way? Do gender equality policy networks exist and what do they look like?

With this in mind, it is surprising that only few studies distinguish between or compare formal and informal contacts, and that actors are so seldom asked to explain their contacts and their relation to each other. This has been particularly important in the context of gender equality policy, because women's movements have either faced problems in accessing formal or informal ways of governance, or they haven't wanted to participate in government at all (Kantola and Outshoorn 2007; Helfferich and Kolb 2001). Hence, in a complex system of multilevel governance, participation of women's movements might become more difficult or their reluctance to participate might grow. A screening of NGOs' formal and informal participation in gender equality policy is a growing necessity to be able to judge the level of openness of European multilevel governance.

There is no doubt that the scope of gender equality policy accounted by the European Union (EU) has noticeably widened since the enforcement of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999. The treaty introduced gender mainstreaming as the EU policy strategy to support gender equality in all policy fields, not only employment policy. Equally important, the number of individual and institutional actors responsible for gender equality policy has accelerated.

In 2006, the European Commission published its communication 'A Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010', which lays down all officially planned Commission

activities in this policy field. The policy program is a working plan addressed to European institutions, member states, stakeholders, and civil society. The 'Roadmap' is divided into six 'priority areas of action', which are each divided into an empirical description and key policy actions. An additional part concerns improving governance and lists all actors formally involved in this policy field.

Although considerable research has been devoted to policy fields listed (cf. Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2008; Verloo 2007; Kreisky, Lang and Sauer 2001), institutions in general (cf. van der Vleuten 2007, Outshoorn and Kantola 2007) and the role of women's movements in particular (cf. below section 2.2), rather less attention has been paid to the structure of formal and informal policy networks of governmental and nongovernmental actors and the relation to multilevel governance. Further, investigations are needed in order to clarify similarities and differences concerning formal and informal networks in gender equality policy.

In this working paper, I utilise and discuss Qualitative Network Analysis (QNA) as a fresh approach to trace formal and informal actors' networks in EU gender equality policy. In the first section, I describe general implications of multilevel governance for gender equality policy with regard to formal and informal actors. Special attention will be paid to the role of women's movements. In the second section, I turn to Qualitative Network Analysis (QNA) and discuss its added value to research on EU gender equality policy. Based on this discussion, I present first results from elite interviews taken from a broader research project. I conclude by suggesting that qualitative network analysis offers well-developed opportunities to reveal small-scale policy networks compared to existing research methods.

## **2. Multilevel Governance and the European Union's Gender Equality Policy**

During the last decades, the structure of the political system in Europe has changed fundamentally. The establishment of the European Union as a supranational governance level caused serious changes to nation states and limited their possibilities to take autonomous decisions regarding, for example, economic, fiscal, security and welfare policy.

The system of multilevel governance in the EU is a continuum with permanent changes of formal and informal rules. A key feature is the role of interinstitutional collaboration, which affects the triangle of European Commission, European Council and European Parliament. Of particular significance is the inclusion of actors like Social Partners, NGOs and other interest groups in some parts of the policy process.

A central issue regarding the process of European integration research concerns changes in and the interplay of national and supranational levels itself. While early integration theories distinguish between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, the current discussion mainly revolves around the concept of multilevel governance. This refers to a mixture of a horizontally and vertically differentiated political system in which different levels sometimes compete with each other (Mayntz 2009). The concept of multilevel governance systemises the decision-making processes of pivotal EU institutions as well as nongovernmental actors based on current formal and informal institutional rules and

long-term trajectories (Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch 2003; Grande and Jachtenfuchs 2000). The concept of 'governance' itself is not clearly defined and depends largely on the research perspective. Despite uncountable studies on the integration process in various policy fields, few are incorporating a gender perspective (Waylen 2008). Simultaneously, a specific comparison of different forms of governance in policy subfields is a missing link in research (Mayntz 2009).

However, policy networks and informal governance have been of smaller interest in EU integration theory (Christiansen; Piattoni 2004). Likewise, integration theory has ignored the interplay of changing gender relations and the integration process (Hoskyns 2004; Kronsell 2005; van der Vleuten 2007) and failed to include gender equality related questions or feminist analyses of hierarchical power relations (Kronsell 2005; Behning and Sauer 2005; Kreisky, Lang and Sauer 2001).

When EU polity is conceptualised as a system of multilevel governance, decision structures and responsibilities depend on the policy field. Regarding gender equality policy, this turns out to be a complex question, because gender equality policy is a so-called transversal issue.

### ***2.1 Gender equality policy as a transversal issue in multilevel governance***

Through Europeanization, member states converge towards a common policy framework without simply replacing domestic policies or actors (Liebert 2003). Indeed, at a global level, the EU has been an agile gender equality actor with considerable legal and political action for more than a decade. Until the legal provisions of the Treaty of Amsterdam, the majority of gender equality European legislation was based on Article 141, Treaty of Rome 1957, which only covered equal pay. Directives based on this article caused respectable developments in most of the member states concerning legal provisions to avoid discrimination or inequalities based on sex, even though implementation differed a lot between member states (Berghahn; Wersig 2005; van der Vleuten 2007). Coming into force with the Treaty of Amsterdam 1999, gender equality policy became an official transversal policy of the EU through article 3§2. Without a doubt, the Treaty of Amsterdam is broadly perceived as a milestone for gender equality policy (Wobbe and Biermann 2009; Fuhrmann 2005; van der Vleuten 2007). The European Commission is now obliged to take impacts on gender equality into account in every policy field by using the strategy gender mainstreaming. The Treaty of Amsterdam enquires as well to improve the situation, if questions of equality between women and men necessitate it, for example through specific measures for the advancement of women, action programs or other mechanisms.

Due to the policy strategy of gender mainstreaming, which turns gender equality into a transversal topic for all policy fields, different ones require different forms of decision-making. For example, in European Foreign and Security Policy (EFSP), most of the decisions are based on intergovernmental agreements while decisions on agriculture are generally taken on a supranational level. No doubt, in most of the policy fields' supranational, national and subnational levels of decision making are interwoven and include additional actors like Social Partners and NGOs. An example is the European Employment Strategy (EES) where the Social Partners are allowed to agree on a 'pre-guideline' that can subsequently be adopted by the European Council. As Anna van der

Vleuten (2007) showed, it is therefore crucial to look at patterns of inclusion and exclusion for different actors, as this reflects and reproduces power relations and identities.

The number of actors responsible for gender equality increased coevally to the broadening of legal provisions. Until the adoption of the directives in the 1970s, there was neither any sign of state feminism<sup>1</sup> nor a women's policy agency on a supranational European level. Instead, the European Court of Justice supported gender equality by developing definitions of direct and indirect discrimination and thereby forcing member states to enhance legislation related to it (Klein 2006; Wobbe and Biermann 2009).

Since then, all three main institutions – Commission, Council, and Parliament – have introduced various groups responsible for women's rights and/ or gender equality. The Commission delegated responsibilities to DG Employment, the Parliament founded the Committee on Women's Rights (FEMM) in 1984, and the Informal Council on Equal Opportunities has been meeting since 1989. A distinctive feature is the development of interinstitutional actors, of which the first to mention, chronologically, is the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women founded in 1981. The composition is remarkable, with two representatives from each member state (one appointed by the member state, the other by the Commission), representatives from the Social Partners, and members of the European Women's Lobby (EWL) as observers. The enforcement of the Treaty of Amsterdam was surrounded by an accelerating creation of additional interinstitutional groups, like the Helsinki Group on Women and Science (1999), the informal Group of Experts on Gender Equality in development cooperation (1999), the European Network to Promote Women's Entrepreneurship (2000), and the High Level Group Gender Mainstreaming (2001). All consist mainly of Commission and member state administrators.

The coexistence of formal, semiformal and informal actors includes perspectives on the placement of nongovernmental actors in this policy field, which is in this case, mainly women's movements.

## **2.2 Women's movements as formal and informal actors**

Women's movements can be seen as the main actors within civil society pushing for women's rights. Women's rights are a central element of gender equality, so the involvement of women's movements as agents of change is a prerequisite for a policy based on societal norms. In addition, women's movements have been relatively successful in putting multifaceted questions of equality on the agenda of international regimes. This includes the shift from focusing on women to focusing on gender as a basis for policy strategies and governance (Rai 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'state feminism' considers different 'feminisms' as an influence on the relation between the state, women's movements and women's agencies (cf. van der Vleuten 2007, Outshoorn and Kantola 2007). Taking a predominantly institutional perspective, they analyse the connection of policy and polity with regard to specific conditions of failure and success of topics and actors. Of interest is, on the one hand, the role of women's policy agencies, women's movements and the relation between the two. On the other hand, they ask how the on-going European integration constantly changes the administrative placement and responsibilities of women's agencies and other institutionalised structures aiming to support gender equality.

Especially noteworthy is the question of how women's movements find a way to cope with the changing circumstances caused by shifting political responsibilities from national to supranational levels of governance as is the case for EU multi-level polity. The EU example is of particular importance in this regard, because official institutions like the European Commission emphasise the crucial role of civil society in general and women's movements in particular for the formulation of gender equality policy. Furthermore, the Commission states that it works on establishing continuous channels of collaboration with civil society actors to improve the formulation of policy goals.

The density, motives and political influence of women's movements' on politics are amongst the better researched social movements and NGOs, both on a national and supranational level. With regard to the EU level, however, there are only a limited number of studies on the composition, activities and political initiatives of EU gender equality policy networks (Woodward 2004, 1999; Schmidt 2005, Montoya 2008, 2009). Woodward (1999) discussed the possibilities of women's movements and gender experts to translate their goals and approaches into the 'rational' language of the state as a precondition to implement gender mainstreaming as a policy strategy. She concludes that it is essential to establish a routine-based and resourceful niche to successfully change policies.

Formal and informal routines and the mutual acceptance of actors are, for that reason, of special interest regarding the 'Roadmap'. How this looks like can be researched by using methods of Social Network Analysis as shown in the following sections.

### **2.3 Gender equality policy networks**

Research on women's policy networks has focused on participation possibilities (Sperling; Bretherton 1996), the network ties of women's movements and their representation in the web (Prudovska; Ferree 2004, Lang 2009), and on the establishment and creation of new policy networks in different policy fields (Montoya 2008, 2009; Zippel 2004). Woodward (2004) characterized a so-called 'velvet triangle', consisting of a loose gender equality policy network built up between female feminist bureaucrats (i.e. European Commission, European Parliament), academic experts, as well as individuals from women's movements who have been actively putting gender equality policy on the European agenda. Birgit Locher (2007) has contributed with an in-depth analysis of the advocacy coalitions active in the politics on trafficking of women. She showed how the commitment to the topic and norms related to it has changed over time. These were caused by altered actor's relations leading to the establishment of a stable policy network of (EU) femocrats, academics and NGOs.

It seems as if the introduction of gender mainstreaming has caused essential changes to the composition of formal and informal gender equality institutions in the EU (True; Mintrom 2001). But how stable is the gender equality policy network, and who is perceived to belong to it? Qualitative Network Analysis (QNA) offers adequate and innovative techniques to discover the actors in gender equality policy networks, and especially the way they perceive and where they position each other.

### **3. A qualitative research perspective on gender equality policy networks<sup>2</sup>**

During the last decades, Social Network Analysis has found its way in sociological and political sciences and has been used for a broad variety of research questions, including social movements' formation and formal and informal networks among or between institutions (Hollstein; Straus 2006). Qualitative Network Analysis (QNA) has established itself as distinct from mainstream network analysis (Hollstein; Straus 2006). It is based on qualitative methods that are also common for feminist research approaches. Empirical data is collected using 'open' questionnaires within qualitative interviews and analysed through an inductive approach such as qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2003). In general, QNA is a useful technique to shed light on personal perceptions of reality and the relations individuals develop (Hollstein; Straus 2006).

An important tool in qualitative network analysis is the network map, which is defined as follows. Unstructured maps are free-style sketches, where interviewees simply get a piece of paper to develop their perspective on a certain question. It is often used as a tool to illustrate in detail the private and occupational interactions of individuals. The primary function is to generate narratives on personal systems of relevance and meaning (Hollstein; Pfeffer 2010). A second category is the structured network map, either standardised or non-standardised. The best-known tool is the 'hierarchical mapping technique' by Kahn and Antonucci (1980), also known as the 'method of concentric circles'. Interviewees get a paper with a limited number of concentric circles. The standardised version includes a fixed definition of the circles or sectors of circles, e.g. family, job, and friends. Thereby, the network maps of different persons are highly comparable. The non-standardised version of concentric circles doesn't define the meaning of the circles. Thus, this version of network maps is only partly comparable on an inter- and intrapersonal level. It is not possible to compare interpersonal proximity or distance of actors, because the circles are not defined, but it is possible to compare the maps created during the interviews regarding the amount of actors mentioned by each participant. To sum up, it is a tool used during interviews simultaneously as a medium of communication and a result of the interview (Hollstein; Pfeffer 2010).

My doctoral research project takes the European Commission's Communication on the 'Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010' as an initial point to investigate the relation between gender equality polity and policy. The main research aim of the project is to explain the ambiguous picture of EU gender equality policy programs against the background of multilevel governance. It identifies which structures and actors offer possibilities to build up advocacy coalitions in EU gender equality policy within and outside of the interinstitutional triangle. Therefore, it consists of a comprehensive research of documents related to the 'Roadmap' and a range of elite interviews with actors responsible for EU gender equality policy.

The main topic of the interviews was the everyday work related to the Roadmap and to EU gender equality policy in general. This included questions on the policy content, on contacts, cooperation and negotiation with other actors, and on the role of gender

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<sup>2</sup> I owe special thanks to Prof. Dr. Betina Hollstein, Universität Hamburg, who provided me helpful QNA literature and the program EgoNet.QF, which I used for the visualization of the network maps.

equality policy in the EU integration process generally. Notes were taken on underlying data like age, country of origin, interview atmosphere and the like.

Within the research project, a policy network is conceptualised as an identifiable, systematic formal and informal connection between actors originating from different levels of governance, with different policy goals, and different dependencies. In addition, the concept used is kept open. Not all actors within the network need to cooperate or act jointly, but might also get together accidentally and support common goals based on different motivations. Policy networks include different (partly overlapping) types of possible investigation in the research project at hand:

- Type of actor: This embraces public and private institutions or subdivisions of it, like Units within a Directorate General or COREPER for the European Council. Also, any other organisations, like multinational enterprises, civil society organisations, trade unions or scientific corporations, can be a type of actor. Besides institutions and organisations, even individuals like MEPs, journalists or scientists can be a type of actor.
- Type of ties: Ties involve unilateral as well as reciprocal contacts among actors. This refers to questions of information exchange, collaboration, competition, power relations or significance.
- Type of governance level: The governance level applies to the main place of action, whether actors act predominantly on a supranational, national or regional level. In each case, this may include all types of actors mentioned above.
- Type of policy goals: Actors goals can be directed to different issues. To mention some variations: they can be policy-oriented (e.g. on combatting violence against women, improving living conditions or supporting gender equality as a part of foreign affairs), group oriented (e.g. for women scientists, women in poverty, the middle-aged white well-educated, mothers) or tool-oriented (e.g. directives, anti-discrimination).

In 2008, I conducted 33 elite interviews with members of different European institutions, including the Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council. In addition, I interviewed members of different NGOs, expert groups and social partners. Interviewees were initially selected according to their status as 'gatekeepers', i.e. those with formal responsibility for European gender equality policy. In a first step, the EU Commission online directory was consulted and searched with the keywords 'gender', 'women' and 'equal'. Listed Units or single members of staff responsible for policy fields were contacted. In the European Parliament, one MEP of each party group who was represented in the FEMM committee received an invitation. In addition, the publication of the Commission on the presentation of the 'Roadmap' was screened for actors that seemed to be relevant for gender equality policy from the perspective of the Commission. Further interviewees were selected by a 'snowball' system. This means that interviewees were asked to mention other important contacts for interviews on the same topic and these became the next contacts for interviews and so on.

The number of 'necessary' interviews was intentionally left open. In contrast, four qualitative goals were used to guarantee content-related representativeness. Interviews

should (1) be distributed over different levels of hierarchy, (2) cover well and less researched policy fields, (3) represent persons from different types of organisations, and (4) be conducted until no new actors, persons or institutions are mentioned.

Within most of the 33 elite interviews, I used the non-standardised structured network map with concentric circles to let actor's sketch their perception of relevant formal and informal contacts concerning the development of the 'Roadmap' as an example for the development of policy programs<sup>3</sup>. Considering the limited research on networks in gender equality at present, I decided to select the tools of inquiry as openly as possible, but at the same time appropriate for the actors appearing. This means, for example, even though I never provided assumed network relations or formal connections, I included interview questions that obviously take for granted that formal and informal contacts and networks exist.

During the interview, I took notes on all actors mentioned and later asked about their place in the network maps if the interviewee didn't indicate this themselves. In the middle of the interview, while talking about actors who are normally contacted in the policy process, two pieces of paper with concentric circles were handed out. The map consisted of four concentric circles and the interviewees' institution was always placed in the middle. Two different maps were used to distinguish between formal and informal connections. A definition of the terms 'formal' and 'informal' was intentionally not given, but if asked, I gave the question back to the interviewee and tried to elicit a definition from them. If they still didn't know how to answer, the formal level was defined as contacts due to legal or other formal obligations and procedures. In contrast, the informal level was defined as actors that are needed or contacted to develop policy without there being a legal or formal obligation to contact them.

Then, the interviewees were asked to place actors they already mentioned within the concentric circles based on their own perception. No list of actors and institutions was presented in order to leave the network map within the reference frame of the interviewee and not to impose a perspective from outside. It was left to them whether they wanted to name institutions, organizations and/ or individuals for both formal and informal levels. Additionally, interviewees were asked several times if there are any other actors they wished to add or had forgotten until now. If there was no response while the network map was still nearly empty, I directly asked about supranational, national or regional institutions and organisations.

The interview questions on contacts and the formal and informal maps were posed as follows:

- Which actors do you normally talk to about gender equality policy formally and informally?

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<sup>3</sup> 16 interviewees created maps of formal and informal contacts. The creation of a network map was left out when time was too limited or when interviewees stated that they normally never participate in the development of gender equality policy programs. However, the network maps covered the whole range of actors interviewed. In addition, all interviewees mentioned other actors and this was used to supply more information.

- Please locate on the different maps, which organizations are closest in the sense of formal structures and informal contacts.

In fact, very few interviewees mentioned any problems with the task of labelling and drawing a formal and informal map. The presupposition that interviewees would have no problem mentioning other institutions but not other personal contacts was accurate. While they were never explicitly asked whether their personal contacts differ strongly from the actors mentioned, this question was solved by an implicitly contrasting question. At the end of the interview everyone was asked who could be a good person to talk to on the topic of the 'Roadmap'. Very seldom were the persons mentioned at the same time members of the formal and informal network maps, but working in additional institutions.

On the contrary, most of them openly said they enjoyed 'being creative' and that they found it a useful tool to illustrate earlier answers and explain them in relation to each other. Most of the interviewees were quite open.

It was possible to compare the maps created during the interviews regarding the amount of actors mentioned by each participant. It was also possible to distinguish the different institutions and organisations involved and the place given to them by different actors. Regarding the concept of multilevel governance, it is possible to monitor if – as suggested – each level is mentioned.

Out of the maps, a picture of reciprocal connections can be derived to display the current perception of actors on EU gender equality networks. They give some idea of the most important actors in this policy field and also point to a distinction between different levels of governance, i.e. supranational, national and regional. An example is the placement of the European Women's Lobby, which appears on most of the network maps but on different circles. Some interviewees placed lines and arrows to show some directions of connections among their contacts, but this was not done systematically. The relation among actors mentioned by the interviewees is an open question, because the different circles weren't defined. Because no list of actors and institutions was presented, there was no guarantee that all the interviewees kept the same range of possible actors in mind. It is also not possible to compare proximity or distance of actors attributed via the placement of labels. Indeed, in this context it is of interest that no interviewee placed actors outside the concentric circles on the formal level, but it happened for the informal level with interviewees stating that those are rare but useful informal contacts.

#### **4. Visualisation of EU gender equality policy networks**

The existing network maps offer the opportunity to combine different steps of analysis. This means that it is possible to generate different aspects of networks and thereby the relation and placing of involved and also not involved actors. In the following section, I will illustrate these variations and provide preliminary research results. The network maps displayed are all exact reproductions of the paper network maps from interviews. For the sake of clarity, I have added different colours for different institutions and extra labels for differing actors within an overarching institution, e.g. European Commission,

European Parliament. Due to space restriction, I also provide not all, but a selected number of maps to illustrate the argumentation.

One possibility to compare networks is to simply count and sum up all contacts mentioned and labelled during the interviews according to their main category (institution) regardless of the distance to 'Ego'. As a result, a table with accumulated data is developed (cf. following section).

The main opportunity offered by network maps is to compare the maps themselves. As mentioned above, this can be split up in various types, for example actor, governance level, ties and/ or policy goals. In addition, it is possible to analyse network maps from the perspective of one actor category, for example women's movements. This shows when they are mentioned and by whom. In the following sections, I will illustrate these different steps with first results from my research project.

#### **4.1 Accumulated data on formal and informal contacts according to institutional category**

'Formal and informal contacts according to main category' means that every single contact is summed up and displayed for each category of actor without stating who mentioned whom (see Table 1). Regarding EU institutions, it is clear that formal rules exist for the formulation of policy programs. The number of formal connections depends on whether a given program has to pass the European Parliament or the European Council or both, whether Social Partners are relevant to the program implementation or whether it is a Commission statement itself.

Table 1. Number of formal and informal contacts, actor's category

	European Commission		EU Council	Interinstitutional	European Parliament		Other EU	Social Partners	NGO		Expert Groups	Member States
	All	DG EMPL			All	FEMM			All	EWL		
Formal	23	8	14	5	18	7	1	2	9	3	4	4
Informal	15	6	9	1	11	3	0	8	15	7	5	11

The majority of research on gender equality policy suggests that the DG Employment Unit responsible for policy design, the Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), and the European Women's Lobby are central to understanding relations in this policy field. For that reason, they are reported on separately. From the perspective of multilevel governance, it can be expected that all main institutions are equally relevant, because gender equality policy is seen as part of social policy and is therefore located between supranational and national levels, including non-governmental actors like social partners. From a network perspective a clear distinction between formal and informal levels concerning the relevance of non-governmental actors would be expected.

A quick view reveals obvious differences between formal and informal levels. While on a formal level the three main EU institutions – Commission, Council and Parliament –

outnumber any other actor category, the informal level shows a different picture. While the Commission is still important, the importance of the Council and the European Parliament diminishes and instead NGOs and national institutions play a bigger role.

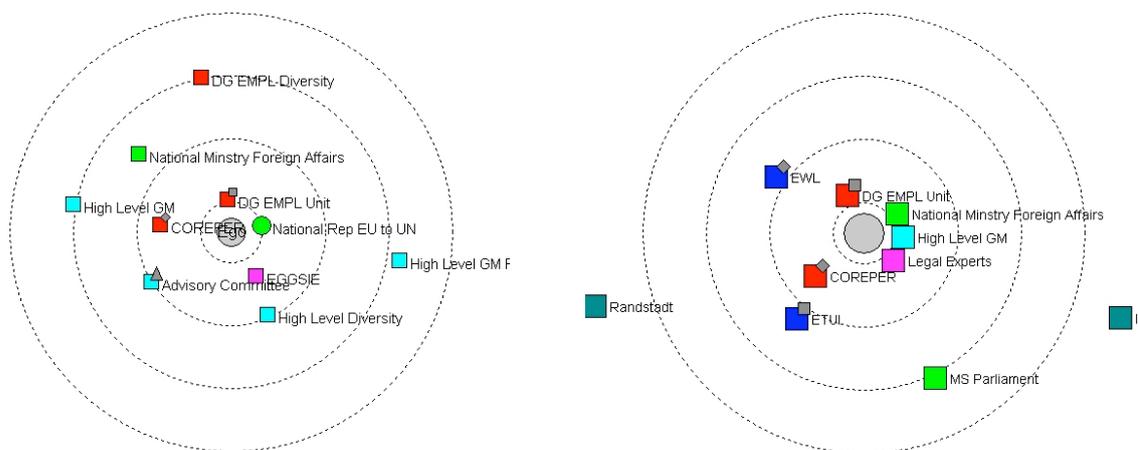
**4.2 Comparing formal and informal networks to type of actor**

The accumulated data do not reveal who mentions whom and therefore some specific relations and explanatory arguments remain hidden. In the following section, I present some of the network maps corresponding to the tables. While accumulating contacts was appropriate for the tables, it is not possible to do that for network maps, because actors within one category sometimes mention each other. This is the case, for example, for the Commission and NGOs.

This form of analysis offers the opportunity to develop a closer look at the distribution of actors mentioned by interviewees. This means that the type of actor preferably mentioned by a participant can be analysed. The analysis comprises three steps: formal networks, informal networks and a comparison of both. When comparing the formal and informal network maps, the first obvious insight is that the maps of one participant are never identical, but always overlap. This means that to some extent the same actors are referred to by the same interviewee but can be positioned on different circles on the formal and informal maps (see Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Formal contacts National Women’s Agency 2

Figure 2. Informal contacts National Women’s Agency 2



In general, the informal level displays more interinstitutional groups, more (scientific) expert groups and more links to national actors. While individuals on a formal level were only mentioned by the EWL, they appeared more often, for example, on informal maps of NGOs, other EU institutions, some Directorate General (DG), and the European Parliament. In contrast to the formal level, actors were also sometimes placed outside the four concentric circles. This was the case for multinational enterprises included by national women’s agencies and DG Development referring to African Caribbean Pacific partner countries (see Figure 3 to 6).

Figure 3. Formal contacts European Women’s Lobby

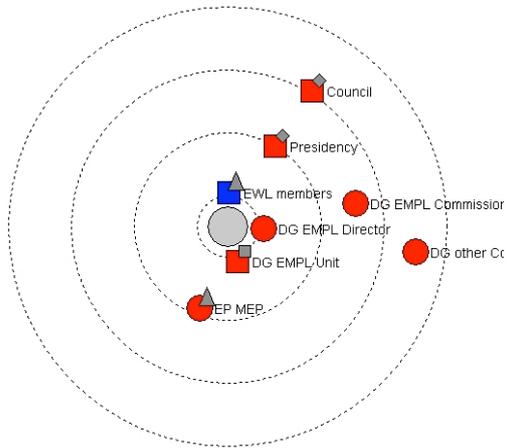


Figure 4. Informal contacts European Women’s Lobby

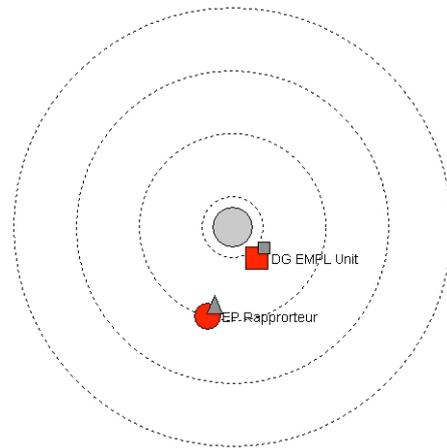


Figure 5. Formal contacts DG Development

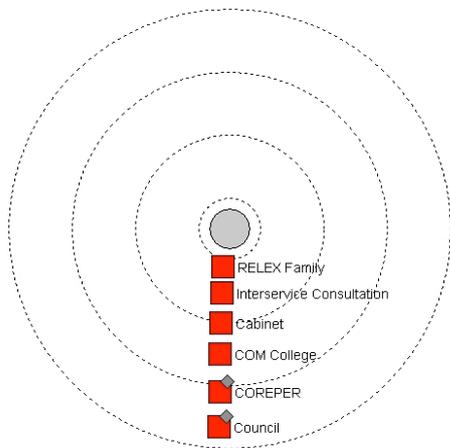
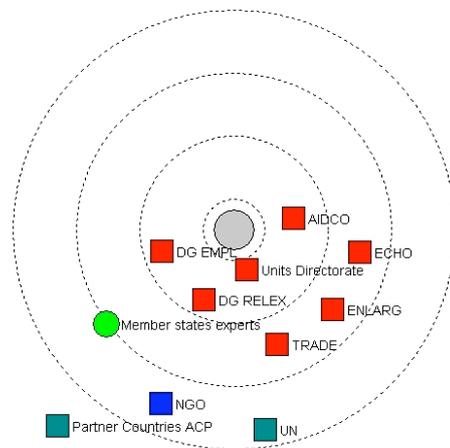


Figure 6. Informal contacts DG Development



The most substantive changes can be seen for the Commission and NGOs, although the ways they change are antipodal. While on an informal level the Commission includes a bigger number and range of actors than on a formal level, NGOs mention fewer contacts.

### 4.3 The Scope of QNA in gender equality policy networks

The visualisation of formal and informal policy networks of governmental and nongovernmental actors demonstrates the existence and formation of current gender equality policy in the EU. The question whether governmental and nongovernmental actors cooperate formally as well as informally is not easy to answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. After all, this is influenced strongly by the actor asked. For instance, the three main EU institutions – Commission, Council, and Parliament – make a clear distinction between formal and informal ties. Nongovernmental actors do not appear on their formal network maps, and the comparison of the actors included mirrors exactly the formal rules and processes according to the Treaties and organizational rules. This means that the Commission only mentions internal decision-making processes and actors connected to them, like the interservice consultation<sup>4</sup> and the Commission College. Council and Parliament are only included when the proposal at hand falls under consultation or co-decision procedure. Council and Parliament describe their formal contacts in the same way; they include actors of their own institution and, depending on the proposal, sometimes the Commission and Council/ Parliament. An occasional exception is the inclusion of NGOs on an outer circle by some MEPs. To contact them seems to be seen as a formal obligation. Very similar is the description of formal networks by the Social Partners, who mention established channels of communication with Commission, Council and Parliament (see Figure 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Formal contacts COREPER

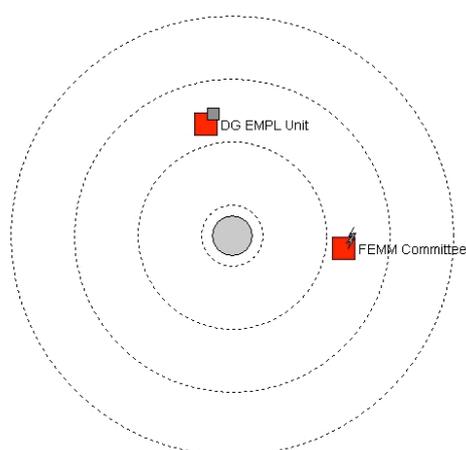
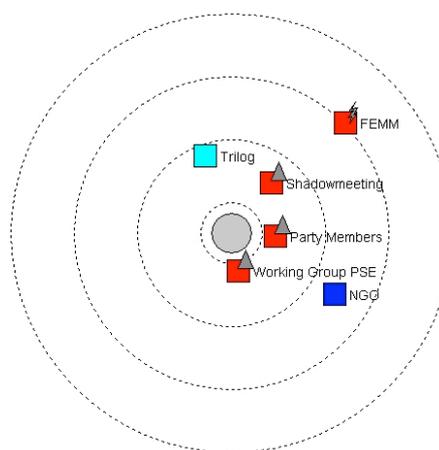


Figure 8. Formal contacts of Party European Socialists



The network maps created by NGOs and national women's agencies are slightly undetermined. Both predominantly mention the EU institutions and national members as their formal ties. While the latter sound logical, the interviews contribute no explanation which formal rules oblige them to contact the EU institutions. This becomes even more

<sup>4</sup> The interservice consultation is the internal procedure of the European Commission to find an agreement on a (legislative) proposal. All Directorate General who participate in a certain policy proposal have to be included during consultation and all need to accept the proposal before it can go to the next hierarchical level, the Commission College.

evident when their network maps are compared with those from the EU institutions described above. If there were formal rules, it could be expected that NGOs and national women's agencies would be included in the formal network maps of the EU institutions as well. Unfortunately, this contradiction cannot be explained by the empirical data available.

The informal level also supplies some conflicting results, although with an opposite tendency. While Commission and Parliament include a wide range of actors, their contacts mentioned are, in the majority of cases, not mirrored in the network maps of those actors. In addition, NGOs tend to include fewer actors than on a formal level, which challenges every investigation on informal governance. To summarize, governmental and nongovernmental actors do, indeed, cooperate formally as well as informally, but not always in the way we would expect. Therefore, it seems that further investigations are needed in order to explain formal and informal networks in gender equality policy.

The results on accumulated formal and informal contacts reveal a contradictory picture. Formal and informal networks overlap to a great extent, but also show some important differences. With the data at hand, it is not possible to answer whether gender equality policy has already become a complete supranational policy and polity of its own, or whether developments depend for the most part on national ties. Nonetheless, striking is the complete irrelevance of interinstitutional groups, despite the fact that the Commission strongly emphasises their role for governance in the special section of the 'Roadmap'. As table 1 shows, traditional paths of collaboration via direct contact with member states seem to be the average and not the exception.

Regarding the results, it can be stated that the concept of multilevel governance seems not to be able to capture relations in gender equality policy. It under-emphasises the role of nongovernmental actors in formal polity and over-emphasizes the role of member states if the network maps are accepted as a description of actor's realities. This might be caused by the fact that gender equality policy is a transversal policy, which does not fit into the simple division of policy subfields.

While conducting interviews, it came as a surprise that the amount of actors relevant to the 'Roadmap' was smaller than expected. In light of the implementation of gender mainstreaming and all the policy topics listed in the 'Roadmap', I anticipated a growing number of actors involved. Furthermore, the Commission itself comments in Annex II on a specific institutional structure for gender equality policies on an EU level (Communication COM (2006) 92 final).

There is no doubt that formal and informal networks in gender equality policy exist, but the term 'velvet triangle' might no longer be adequate. While the female feminist bureaucrats of the European Commission, Parliament, and women's movements are present, the relevance of academic experts seems to vanish for concrete supranational policies. Instead, they are relevant for member states and other European institutions.

## 5. Conclusion

In this working paper, I explain the current formal and informal composition of gender equality policy networks in the European Union by applying Qualitative Network Analysis. Methods of qualitative network analysis proved to be a useful tool to support interviews on complex questions in multilevel governance. Network maps help to clarify and visualise actor's perceptions in detail. Nevertheless, clear limitations exist, because the visualised relations between actors mentioned by interviewees cannot simply be transferred into a complete picture of formal and informal networks due to the fact that non-standardised network maps are only partly comparable.

Therefore, the method of concentric circles needs to be more specifically combined with the questionnaire, for example, through a clear definition of circles. On the other hand, the method might become overburdened by clearly defined circles and could demand to much ad hoc abstract-thinking capacity from interviewees. The appealing part of drawing network maps is that interviewees can simply apply their own view and do not need extensive explanations. The first results of my research project point to the necessity of introducing interviewees' to this way of thinking. Starting with such a network map would not be appropriate since interviewees need to understand the context before being able to sketch a network map on their own. By doing this, the possibility of asking about the power relations and maybe conflicting policy goals of actors becomes limited. As an alternative, these nuances can be derived from the overall interview content.

The network maps created by the interviewees are, without doubt, a surprise with regard to informal levels of EU multilevel governance. The question remains, whether different institutions perceive the definitions of formal and informal in a different way. While the three main institutions have a very clear distinction, the rest include actors and contacts you would normally expect to find on informal rather than formal levels. At this stage, it is not possible to determine whether this is the case, because supranational actors are already more used to separate formal and informal contacts in the EU, while NGOs and actors rooted on a national level are still finding it difficult to define their role in European integration.

Regarding the concept of multilevel governance, methods of qualitative network analysis offer the possibility to derive a clearer picture of relations among formal and informal actors and to adjust the concept to a transversal policy field, gender equality. Although I expected interviewees to mention actors from every level and to simply differentiate between their role based on variations of proximity and distance within the concentric circles, this was not fulfilled. Instead, it was surprising that the vast majority of actors mentioned were actors from a supranational level. The national level played only a minor role and depended heavily on the role of the interviewee. This means that when the actor was placed between national and supranational levels anyway, e.g. COREPER, actors from a national level were more often included. Actors from a regional level were never mentioned.

Until now, the concept of multilevel governance tends to under-emphasise the role of nongovernmental actors in formal polity and over-emphasise the role of member states. Nevertheless, with the data at hand, it is not possible to answer, whether gender equality policy has already become a complete supranational policy and polity of its own, or whether developments depend for the most part on national ties. It is therefore

astonishing that interinstitutional groups were set up, but traditional paths of collaboration via direct contact with member states still seem to be the average and not the exception.

As a conclusion we see that formal and informal networks in gender equality policy exist. Still, there is a need to further qualify whom they consist of and on which level of governance they are placed. As shown, the role of e.g. academic experts changes between supranational and national level and the term 'velvet triangle' might no longer be adequate.

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