



How are Policy Knowledge and Expertise Generated in Civil Society Organisations?

Mapping opportunities for Learning in the European Women's Lobby

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Abstract

In this paper, I map the opportunities for intra-organizational learning in the European Women's Lobby (EWL) and argue that these processes generate the expertise and specialised knowledge required by EU governance. I show that the EWL's learning processes do not just result in the formation of expertise, but have also led to institutional transfer. Overall, the EWL has aims to create a culture of mutual learning and knowledge sharing in order to fulfil the EU's demand for policy expertise. However, the requirement for expertise is not just imposed from the top onto the EWL, but is in fact created actively as an important organisational resource. This is significant because the potential 'permanent tension' for civil society organisations (CSOs) to be both expertise provider in EU governance, while at the same time acting as intermediaries between the institutions and its member organisations is not as pronounced as expected. Intra-organizational learning is strategically chosen. Contrary to most scholarship, which either analyses the role of expertise in EU policy-making, or the role of CSOs for legitimising EU legislative processes, the article takes a novel approach in demonstrating that for EU CSOs, the functions of expertise providers and representatives of civil society are interwoven.

Keywords

European Union – European Women's Lobby – Gender expertise – Knowledge in civil society – Gender expertise – Learning – Nordic women's organisations – Organisational transfer

1. Introduction

Governance involves complex decision-making processes where a variety of actors, including policymakers and stakeholders, consider and debate shared problems, as well as identify mechanisms for solving these problems. In the European Union (EU), civil society organisations (CSOs) have increasingly become involved in policymaking as part of 'new modes of governance' and the 'participatory governance' from the early 2000s onwards. The European Commission identified civil society as key to offset poor responsiveness of political representatives and strengthen the problem-solving capacity of executives. Moreover, participatory governance aimed to promote the ability of those affected by policies to directly part-take in policy-processes and alleviate the EU's democratic deficit (Kohler-Koch 2013: 1). Since then, however, earlier enthusiasm about participatory governance was replaced by two observations pertaining to EU governance: On the one hand, scholars have identified the proliferation of governance's extensive and increased reliance on science and professional expertise (defined as 'expertization', see Turner 2014; Krick 2018), and on the other hand, civil society groups and international NGOs are said to increasingly professionalise in order to successfully achieve their objectives (Eberwein and Saurugger 2013).

The growing 'expertization' and professionalization¹ of EU policymaking stems from the requirement on the part of the EU for special knowledge in producing standards, regulations and policies, requiring expertise on the part of those actors involved in governance processes. Whereas participatory mechanisms in EU governance were supposed to challenge the elitist and technocratic ways of policymaking, they have thus brought about their own set of specialism, professions, technologies and expertise, raising the spectre of a 'technocracy of participation' (Voss and Amelung 2016). In this context of paradoxical conditions and conflicting theorisations and conceptions of EU policymaking, this paper asks how civil society actors handle the 'permanent tension' (Saurugger 2012, Zimmer and Freise 2008) between acting as 'transmission belts' or links with the grassroots and European decision-makers on the one hand, and on the other hand supplying additional expertise and specialised knowledge to European institutions. Thus, this paper takes as its starting point the expectation derived from the existing literature, that there are potentially conflicting demands placed upon civil society actors by the EU system. Through the investigation provided here, this paper links theories of policy learning to the production of knowledge and expertise, providing new insights and following the call for more research efforts on the better understanding of learning effects in specific groups and specific types of knowledge claims (Moyson et al. 2017: 166).

The analysis focuses on the area of gender policy and the European Women's Lobby (EWL) as an example of a multi-level, social interest organisation. Established in 1990,

¹ McCarthy and Zald (1994: 375) define professionalized non-state actors as entities characterised by: 1) a leadership that devotes full time to the association with a large proportion of resources originating outside the constituency the group claims to represent, 2) a very small membership base, 3) an attempt to represent or speak in the name of a potential constituency, and 4) attempts to influence policy towards that same constituency.

the EWL represents and brings together women's advocates at the national and European level. There is a vast literature on the strategies, resources, networks and levels of influence of such civil society actors (for an overview see: Johansson and Kalm 2015; Bunea and Baumgartner 2014).

In the area of gender and politics, existing studies have explored the evolution of gender policies in the European system (van der Vleuten 2016; Jacquot 2015), the impact of the economic crisis and austerity on women (Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Durbin et al. 2017) and the recent opposition to gender equality in Europe (Verloo 2018). Scholarship on civil society organisations has hitherto explored the way CSO involvement contributes to deliberation, participation, and the emergence of a public sphere (Ruzza and della Sala 2007; Steffek and Nanz 2008). The representativeness of CSOs and their legitimacy have also been discussed (Kohler-Koch 2013, Johansson and Lee 2014). However, more should be known about the extent to which EU governance has generated identifiable changes in CSOs. This paper builds on and contributes to the scarce literature addressing this blind spot (Salgado 2014; Ruzza 2015).

This paper empirically investigates how the EWL has adapted to the increased 'expertisation' of EU governance through learning. While there might be numerous direct and indirect processes at play to this end, the empirical focus of this paper lies in the intra-organisational mechanism of learning, which, it is argued here, results in the creation and intermediation of knowledge and expertise in order to maintain the EWL's privileged position as the dominant gender interest representative at EU level. To this end, the paper relates to the literature in the fields of learning and policy transfer, the uses of specialised knowledge in international policymaking and European gender policy. This paper also contributes to the conceptual debate on 'gender expertise' by highlighting where this expertise 'comes from'; that is to say, how it is generated and shared between the different levels and actors engaged in these processes.

The empirical analysis maps the opportunities for learning and cross-fertilisation of knowledge and expertise within the EWL. Through qualitative interviews with EWL members and document analysis, several indicators of different types of learning are identified on the micro and meso-level. The paper proceeds as follows: After elaborating on the role of European level CSOs as expertise providers in EU governance, a brief overview of the theoretical contributions on policy learning in the existing literature is given. This is followed by the empirical section, which outlines the case selection and methodology, as well as the mapping of opportunities for learning in the EWL. The final section provides a concluding discussion of the findings and offers ideas for how to develop them further in future research.

2. The role of European CSOs as expertise providers

There is a rich and ever-growing literature on the knowledge dimension in public policymaking. Concepts like 'epistemic communities' (Haas 1992; Cross 2011) or 'velvet triangles' (Woodward 2004) explain policymaking by transnational 'policy implementation networks' (Kohler-Koch 2002), or knowledge-driven networks

(Ahrens 2018). In the context of the European Union, the study of the supranational bureaucratic structures and the distinct technocratic character of European policymaking has been a vital area of research since the very beginning of European integration (Haas 1958). Numerous studies of EU governance have highlighted the role of 'experts' (Radaelli 1999), professional 'interest groups' (Greenwood 2011), as well as highly specialised 'policy networks' (Falkner 2000) and 'advocacy coalitions' (Sabatier 1998) in EU policymaking (Büttner et al. 2015).

Along with the paradigm shift from 'government' to 'governance' during the past three decades, a multiplicity of new actors and new forms of professionalism and expertise have emerged within and around established bodies of policymaking (Rose and Miller 2008). As part of interacting with civil society across Europe, the EU has incentivised the formation of Brussels-based umbrella organisations, such as the EWL. While expected to mediate, or even overcome, the distance between the EU institutions and European civil society, CSOs are also providers of knowledge and expertise in consultation processes. Previous research has shown that EU-based interest groups increasingly focus on expertise provision and consensus building strategies (Salgado 2014). This is due to the European Commission promoting a type of lobbying that is based on information and expertise provision (Sanchez Salgado 2018), as this transnational expertise is needed in order to legitimise supranational policy innovations.

Multi-level governance structures, like the EU, are arenas in which CSOs create and disseminate specialised policy knowledge. Such knowledge is not only crucial in identifying issues and putting them on the political agenda, but also in providing alternative policy solutions or infuse policy processes with normative and moral arguments (Seibicke 2019). The transnational expertise of CSOs is not static, but actively created, expanded and used for advocacy. This expertise plays a key role in EU policymaking, for example, by bridging cultural and legal differences and creating 'European issues'. Knowledge intermediation can also be understood as an interactive process of mutual learning. The EWL, for instance, facilitates collaborative activities through which the involved gender advocates can learn about each other's experiences, share knowledge and build transnational gender expertise. The Commission has actively supported transnational gender advocates by funding research, conferences, observatories and consultation groups. Such activities are based on learning and result in the generation and development of gender expertise and knowledge.

The engagement of CSOs with EU governance, however, has also garnered critique. Some critics have claimed that EU level CSOs are dependent on, rather than autonomous from, EU institutions and are therefore limited in what criticisms they can put forward (Johansson and Kalm, 44). In the case of gender advocates, their contribution to expertise-based policymaking has sparked a vigorous normative debate. Those commentators in favour argue that engaging in policymaking can create opportunities to exert normative influence on EU gender policies. Helfferich and Kolb (2001), for example, argue that the EWL succeeded in placing gender equality on the Treaty of Amsterdam's agenda because of strategically created professional expertise, with which the EWL was able to comment on treaty drafts and articulate demands in hearings and position papers (Zippel 2004: 64). Those critical of these successes,

however, have shown the dangers associated with their professionalisation, as well as conflicts and power differentials among actors within organised civil society. The dynamic between local grassroots organisations and elite professional experts can be unequal and complicated (Naples 2002). Nevertheless, as argued by Radealli (2002: 198), knowledge is a highly valued resource in the making of EU policy. In a polity like the EU, where protest has traditionally had little effect, gender expertise is needed to participate in policymaking (Stone 2004). In order to make any normative assessments on the possible benefits and/or dangers of the ‘expertification’ and ‘professionalisation’ associated with gender equality advocates’ engagement with policymaking, a better understanding of the way expertise is created, shared and used is needed.

3. Mechanisms generating knowledge and expertise

Paving the way for the analysis of non-state actors as policy transfer agents, Stone (2004) posits that international transfer of policy and practice ‘do not always occur in a simple bilateral exchange between sovereign states but can be complemented and/or bypassed by transnational transfer networks’. Such transnational policy networks are ‘assemblages of practical knowledge’ (Ilcan and Phillips 2008) and necessitate an approach that emphasises the transfer advocacy roles of CSOs. Transnational CSOs are ‘policy and knowledge transfer entrepreneurs’ facilitating exchanges between actors in several countries, often operating via transnational networks. They are said to engage in the ‘soft transfer’ of knowledge, broad policy ideas and norms; the intellectual matter that underpins policies (Stone 2012), rather than in ‘hard’ transfer of institutions or administrative tools. Thus, transnational CSOs function as resource banks; researchers and advocates of policy ideas; and as coalition builders and network conveners. They are embedded in evolving structures of transnational governance and have been labelled as ‘norm entrepreneurs’ or ‘ideas brokers’. By sharing their expertise and information, common patterns of understanding regarding policy can be formed. Thus, transnational CSOs are important arenas for learning and dynamic processes of multi-level knowledge exchange.

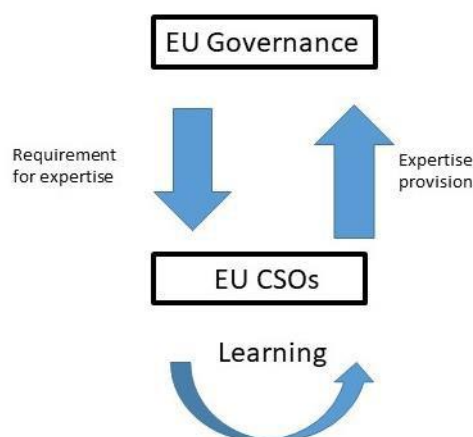


Figure 1: Learning as capacity building in response to expertise requirement

The EWL can be described as such an arena, as it consists of international and domestic women's organisations, bound together by the shared values and discourse of gender equality and women's rights, engaging in dense interactions involving knowledge, information and best practices. The EWL's transnational gender expertise is important in EU policymaking. However, such expertise is not static, it is actively created, expanded and used (Zippel 2004). The underlying mechanism for generating knowledge and expertise, it is argued here, is learning. Within governance processes, learning among policy actors can be critical for shaping agreed problem definitions and solutions. More broadly, learning can be seen as an essential element of effective and productive governance, for without learning it is difficult for governance actors to understand the complexity of many public sector issues and resolve conflict among competing interests (Heikkila and Gerlak 2016). This line of thought brings us to the consideration of what, if any, role does learning play for the CSOs engaged in EU governance? And more specifically, how does learning contribute to the EWL's gender expertise?

3.1. Learning

The cognitive and social dynamics of policy learning involve the accumulation of data about problems and solutions in the context of social interactions. Drawing on this data, policy actors acquire, translate and disseminate new information and knowledge towards achieving political endeavours and for revising or strengthening their policy-related beliefs over time (Moyson et al. 2017). Given that learning is a complex and important phenomenon for governance, scholars have explored the meaning of learning and its relationship to governance from a diversity of theoretical perspectives, which can be differentiated according to the level at which they analyse learning: Micro-level, meso-level and macro-level.

Micro-level approaches assume that learning takes place within and between individuals within social settings (also called social learning). Social learning approaches integrate learning and power, recognising that policy knowledge is socially embedded (see e.g. Mostert et al. 2007). Examples of social learning approaches include Haas (1992) 'epistemic communities', Hall's (1993) 'social learning', and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) 'advocacy coalition framework'. Meso-level approaches focus on organisational learning. This perspective posits that organisations adopt a learning perspective in response to changes in their environment (Cyert and March 1963). Learning for organisations can have a strategic character, because it affects their ability to identify, react and adapt to contextual changes (Moyson et al. 2017: 163). Finally, macro-level approaches study how learning occurs at the system level, especially across government units. Such processes have been termed 'policy transfer' and 'diffusion' (Meseguer 2005; Nicholson-Crotty 2009), 'lesson drawing' (Rose 1991), 'policy convergence' (Knill 2005) and 'network governance' (Scott et al. 2019, Sørensen and Torfing 2007).

With the various empirical explorations of learning, the concept of learning has also been conceptualised in a variety of ways. The existing interventions can be roughly grouped into those who emphasise that learning is part of a governing *process*, and others who define learning more as the *outcome* or product of this process. Process

oriented studies of learning include, for example, Lasswell (1971), who defines learning as the ‘intelligence’ phase of the policy process, where gathering, processing and disseminating information takes place. Rose (2005) argues that learning occurs through a series of steps such as looking for alternatives and evaluating how they would work. Similarly, Birkland (2006) indicates that learning involves processes of gathering new information from experience and using that information to improve policy design. Thus, learning occurs in stages, where the acquisition of knowledge is followed by an assessment or translation of information or ideas, and the eventual dissemination and institutionalisation of said ideas and knowledge. Outcome oriented studies, such as Sabatier (1998: 104), conceptualise learning as relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioural intentions that result from experience and are concerned with the attainment, or revision, of public policy. Learning, from this perspective, emphasises the cognition and redefinition of interests on the basis of new knowledge, which affects the fundamental beliefs and ideas behind policy approaches (Stone 2004: 548). More recently, efforts have been made to integrate both perspectives by combining the process and product element. Heikkila and Gerlak argue that learning as it relates to governance is both:

- 1) a collective process, which may include acquiring information through diverse actions (e.g. trial and error), assessing or translating information, and disseminating knowledge or opportunities across individuals in a collective; and
- 2) collective products that emerge from the process, such as new shared ideas, strategies, rules, or policies.

(Heikkila and Gerlak 2011: 623)

Researchers have also attempted to differentiate between types of learning. May’s (1992) typology is frequently highlighted in studies emphasising learning (see for example Howlett 2019; Evans 2017; Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2017). Richard Rose (1991) refers to ‘lesson-drawing’ when arguing that learning occurs via transnational epistemic communities. Another influential concept is that of ‘advocacy coalitions’, with Sabatier (1998) arguing that such coalitions are sites of policy-oriented learning. However, rather than altering ‘deep core beliefs, changed circumstances cause the modification of near core beliefs’. Similarly, Hall’s model of ‘social learning’ identifies ‘first-order’, ‘second order’ learning and suggests that ‘third order learning’, which affects the fundamental beliefs and ideas behind policy approaches, can also take place (Stone 2000: 60). Policy learning occurs when policymakers adjust their cognitive understanding of policy developments and modify policies in the light of new knowledge gained from past policy experiences. Thus, policy learning may result in more coherent transfer of ideas, policies and practices (Stone 2004: 548). It can be of different orders: shallow, tactical or instrumental learning as opposed to deeper social or policy learning.

These approaches share the view that learning takes place in ‘complex arrangements of state and societal actors in various types of domestic and transnational policy networks and policy communities’ (ibid.). Learning can also result in a codification of knowledge, where previous processes aid the formation of a consensus of certain problem definitions (consensual knowledge). However, while learning has been

acknowledged to be an important feature of governance processes, it is not a straightforward phenomenon to define or observe empirically. Despite extensive interest in the concept of learning in the governance literature, measuring and studying the processes and products of learning are, according to some, still in their infancy. The following section therefore maps, rather than measures, opportunities and types of learning in the EWL, in order to gain a better understanding how the EWL's gender expertise is generated.

4. Empirically studying learning

The empirical analysis consists of a case study mapping of the opportunities for learning and knowledge intermediation within the EWL. The methodology is in keeping with policy transfer and learning studies, in that it uses a qualitative approach in a limited number of cases, allowing for a nuanced analysis of the learning mechanisms involved (Marsh and Sharman 2009).

The case study illustrates opportunities for learning and knowledge intermediation for ideational actors like the EWL's gender experts. They include (but are not limited to) conferences, workshops, joint campaigns, transnational data gathering and project reports. Indicators of knowledge formation, as well as learning, are examples of ideas, paradigms, lessons, problem definitions and policy interpretations being shared, adopted and codified intra-organisationally.

4.1. Empirically analysing learning

There is a widely acknowledged difficulty in empirically analysing learning. Gilardi and Radaelli (2012: 162) argue that it is an over-conceptualised and empirically under-researched phenomenon. Regarding the time dimension, a narrow time frame can be too short to observe learning, while a long view might make it impossible not to find instances of learning. Moreover, when the empirical analysis is carried out via qualitative interviewing – the preferred tool in most studies – it can be difficult for respondents to adequately judge the importance of learning processes. However, the goal of this paper is not to measure the amount of learning taking place, but to map the opportunities by giving illustrative examples of learning in order to gain a better understanding of the role of learning and knowledge intermediation in generating expertise in CSOs generally, and the EWL's gender expertise specifically.

4.2. Sub-group selection

As the EWL has more than 2000 member organisations, a regional sub-sample was chosen. The sub-group consists of the Nordic member organisations of the EWL. The Nordic region makes for an interesting sub-sample of EWL women's organisations for several reasons. Investigating the cooperation and variation of Nordic women's association within the EWL network seem a worthwhile endeavour as previous scholarship in the field has challenged the unitary image of the region. A comparative study of the relations between gender, politics and democracy in the Nordic countries

(Bergqvist et al. 1999) found important national variations. Women have mobilised differently in the Nordic countries, with Denmark having had the most bottom-up mobilisation from civil society organisations, whereas in Sweden and Norway there has been a high degree of institutionalisation of gender equality. In Finland, autonomous women's movements have historically played a relatively minor role, whereas women's party sections have been major actors (Hoppania and Holli 2015). The empirical research design takes into account these differences by interviewing actors from across the Nordic region, as well as from the EWL. Representatives of the Danish, Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian national 'coordinations', as well as the membership officer of the EWL, were interviewed. Additionally, Nordic experts (from Finland and Iceland) at the EWL Observatory on Violence against Women, as well as the coordinator at the EWL secretariat, were interviewed.

4.3. Semi-structured interviews

The empirical data material collected for this paper consists of documents and ten semi-structured expert interviews. For the data collection, interviewees were identified through their position within the EWL and in the national member organisations. The transnational expertise and experience of working with the EWL were basis for the selection of gender experts (they could be/ have been, for example, a liaison person between the EWL and the national coordination or a Board member of the EWL). Due to the regional focus on the Nordic states, the group of possible interviewees was limited, although for some of the countries two interviews were conducted. This was mostly the case when some of those contacted referred other suitable persons for the interview. Apart from two Observatory experts, all those contacted agreed to an interview. For reasons of geography, availability and time constraints of the interviewees, eight of the interviews were conducted over the phone, one via skype and one in person.

5. Mapping learning in the European Women's Lobby

Following the discussion of the different approaches to the conceptualisation of learning in policy studies, the most useful for our purpose is the multi-level perspective where the indicators of the opportunities for learning within the EWL are grouped into different levels. The most common instances of learning take place on the micro (individual) level, as well as on the meso (organisational) level. In the following section, illustrative examples for micro and meso-level learning will be outlined.

5.1. Opportunities on the micro-level: Social learning

Social learning has been referred to as the general shaping of the policy climate and the policymaking process. Through issuing reports, newsletter, policy papers and press releases, awareness raising and the dissemination of knowledge are aimed at changing perceptions of the public (Bomberg 2007). A more detailed theorisation of social learning is given by Brown and Timmer (2006). They identify five indicators for social learning in and through CSOs: (1) identifying emerging issues, (2) facilitating grassroots voice, (3) building bridges to link diverse stakeholders, (4) amplifying the

public visibility and importance of issues and (5) monitoring problem-solving performance. Firstly, identifying issues refers to transnational civil society actors contributing to identifying problems by lobbying international agencies, by symbolic media campaigns and by communicating experiences to raise public awareness. Secondly, by representing unheard voices and helping marginalised groups affected by transnational issues to organise themselves, COSs enable capacity building to engage with decision makers, and develop influence strategies and campaigns. Thirdly, transnational civil society actors may also contribute to social learning by amplifying the visibility and impact of emerging issues. Processes of amplification include leverage through mobilisation and targeting key actors, lending legitimacy to the issue, emphasising its impact on wider constituencies and engaging in symbolic actions that draw attention to the problem. Issue amplification gains broader visibility for the issue, raises public awareness and support, and mobilises wider and deeper coalitions for problem-solving. Fourthly, CSOs emphasise building bridges among diverse stakeholders in contested problem domains by convening meeting, negotiating shared definitions of problems and possible directions, and facilitating identification and deployment of resources and capacities. Bridge building can take place across different levels, such as from local to European, and/or across national boundaries. It can include creation and use of boundary-spanning devices such as reports, maps, or ICT tools to bring diverse actors together (Ibid: 10). Bridge building requires skills such as managing conflicts, facilitating constructive dialogue, fostering mutual understanding, negotiating mutually acceptable deals, and creatively synthesising across diverse perspectives. As a mediator among stakeholders, CSOs can facilitate engagements among complementary resources that enable collective learning that cannot be accomplished by a single actor. Finally, the effectiveness of social problem-solving initiatives is monitored and analysed. Moreover, new problem areas or unintended consequences can be identified, implementation improved and information provided in order to accelerate problem-solving (ibid: 10).

In case of the EWL, an example for social learning, and especially for building bridges, raising awareness, and amplifying issues is the 'Nordic Forum' conference that took place in 2014. It gathered 200 organisations, as well as feminist activists and politicians to discuss both national and international women's policy issues and strategies. It was borne out of the realisation that, similarly to global developments, the Nordic countries face 'major policy challenges to achieve gender equality'. The Swedish Women's Lobby took the initiative to organise a joint Nordic preparatory conference in November 2011, resulting in a Nordic steering committee, consisting of the feminist umbrella organisations from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland, initiating and planning the main conference. The Forum aimed to build and strengthen networks for the exchange of experiences, formulate recommendations on future strategies, and to build understanding for challenges and opportunities for gender equality within the region. Thus, in terms of the regional transnational knowledge exchange, the Nordic countries often cooperate, with the EWL network functioning as a 'uniting factor' (EWL Observatory expert 2). The interviewee also noted that the Forum sent a powerful signal to policymakers and the wider public in terms of the number of participants and awareness raised. One expert describes the mutual learning

processes, which generate the EWLs knowledge and expertise as follows:

I get to share everything I know, but also get to learn from everything they [other experts] do, get connections, and can think on how to take things forward in [my country]. So, the EWL and Observatory work feeds into my national work. The [Observatory's] aim is to make sure there are connections between all the information collected on European level and in the national context.

(EWL Observatory expert 1)

Similarly, there is an awareness of the perception of the Nordic countries within the organisation and the benefit of participating in its knowledge intermediation:

In the EWL, the Nordic countries are often seen as role models of gender equality, and often we can present successful concepts and politics to the other members. However, I find it important to also highlight the severe problems we have for example in [my country] with violence against women and the lack of politics to combat the problem effectively.

(EWL Nordic expert 5)

Conversely, the EWL Secretariat acknowledges: 'If something worrying happens in a Nordic country, like [in one] that has ratified the Istanbul Convention and is supposed to be implementing it, it is really a flag for us' (EWL Secretariat 2). Thus, if a problematic trend is observed in (one of) the Nordic countries, the EWL alerts the rest of the organisation to this emerging issue.

Another example for (transnational) social learning within the EWL is the Nordic-Baltic Pilot Project. This three year programme (1 October 2005 – 30 September 2008) aimed to strengthen the cooperation and develop concrete activities to support and assist women victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the region. This pilot project included partners from all the Nordic and Baltic countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden) working together to develop the best practices and models for support to women victims of trafficking. The Network met regularly to develop and share experiences and expertise, to develop common standards and guidelines for victim support, and to identify and agree on regional priorities. This was done by gathering key stakeholders, increased cooperation, coordination and exchange of information across and in each of the participating countries. Another element of the knowledge sharing process consisted of capacity building and training. Nordic-Baltic regional capacity building seminars focused on making an assessment of existing practices, on identifying good models and practices, and on developing new models and guidelines that better respond to the needs of the victims. The project also provided some limited funds for training activities at national level in the Baltic countries. The coordinator of one of the Nordic countries in this project spoke of the significance and impact it had: 'In [my country] it was an opportunity to activate others [and we created] an informal, almost secret network with allies from all instances that have to do with trafficking. We shared this experience with others and networked across the borders' (EWL Observatory Nordic expert 3). The EWL has also

acted as a uniting force of anti-sex work activists:

Within the European and Baltic context, we had the Swedish model, in the Baltic states the women used us; I don't know how often I was invited to the Baltic states to try to bring our experience to inspire [their authorities]. The EWL was part of bringing us together [...] they used us and I used them many times, I don't know how often I have used being part of it [the EWL], when you are convincing the authorities in your own country it is very good to relate to something bigger, we have done that many, many times.

(EWL Observatory Nordic expert 3).

5.2. Opportunities on the meso-level: Organisational and political learning

Political learning seeks to create more sophisticated policy advocates (May 1992, 332) through training and capacity building, resulting in organisational effectiveness. A central organisational structure for learning and generating expertise within the EWL is the Observatory on Violence Against Women (VAW). With its transnational (pan-European) expertise the Observatory has been instrumental for the EWL to design its advocacy and policy activities on the basis of a comprehensive understanding of the situation in Europe regarding the different types of VAW. It is described as 'giving a feminist space for sharing knowledge and information; bridging with regional initiatives, developing common tools; stimulating reflection and mobilising members and women's organisations' (EWL Observatory 2016). The Observatory is thus an important expert body, which identifies burning issues, trends and knowledge gaps (Kantola 2006). It initiates and conducts research, offers consultancy and training and helps to support network building. The Observatory consists of 35 gender experts from thirty EU countries, who all have extensive expertise and experience in the area of VAW. Their professional backgrounds range from researcher and academics, lawyers and legal advisors, NGOs staff and campaigners, social workers, councillors and front-line service providers (EWL Observatory 2017). Experts are appointed for up to two three-year terms. The opportunities for expertise exchange are both face-to-face and virtual. Experts meet once a year for a two-day meeting, where issue priorities and strategies are developed, and expert knowledge and best- practices shared. The EWL liaison also facilitates online communication of the Observatory experts via a mailing list and shares information and facilitates discussion, or sends pieces of information around when something important is taking place. She also asks for feedback on country-specific developments (EWL Secretariat 2).

The Observatory brings gender experts together 'so that we can support each other in our joint feminist mission and overcome divisions' (EWL Observatory expert 1). The Observatory thus acts as a site for peer-to-peer support and expertise exchange, as well as to formulate and mobilise substantiating knowledge (Boswell 2009). For experts from more front-line organisations, most of the Observatory work is considered: 'high-level political work. (...) There is a heavy focus on the Istanbul Convention, which is a vital tool to use in many countries, despite a big backlash against it in some countries' (Observatory expert 2). Another expert speaks of the Observatory as a mutual resource of expertise:

When I needed some kind of expertise I invited many women from other countries to come here [...] and I was invited many times in this context, when I told within the Observatory what I was doing [in my country] they thought it was inspiring and they wanted me to bring the ideas to their homeland.

(EWL Observatory expert 3).

Overall, the EWL Observatory is perceived as a 'well-coordinated, well-functioning feminist network, where little time is wasted on debates around issue definitions' (EWL Observatory expert 1) and the Secretariat 'keeps everything going [...] and is well organised' (EWL Observatory expert 2), with good cooperation between the EWL Secretariat and individual experts. Challenges remain, however, when it comes to the practical aspects of transnational cooperation. Having the funding for only one annual meeting means that opportunities for face-to-face knowledge and expertise exchange are limited. At the same time, working remotely through online platforms and shared files is not yet used effectively throughout the network. While remote joint working platforms are available, most exchanges take place through the email lists and occasional Skype-meetings (EWL Observatory expert 1 and 2).

Another example of organisational learning is the report and project on the issue of online violence against women and girls. By building on common knowledge and understandings, the EWL has in recent times focused more on the topic of digitalisation and cyber-violence. The issues of online threats and hate speech arose very prominently in the discussions within the Observatory, where a need for a better understanding of the joint challenges in Europe related to technology and gender (EWL Observatory expert 1) was identified. During the 2017 annual meeting, the national experts met with Google Brussels to discuss how to tackle online violence against women, analysing how to provide female politicians, activists and service providers with knowledge and tools. The session was a follow-up to the six-month EWL project 'HerNetHerRights' and a report that maps the state of online VAW. The report analysed the current state of online VAW in Europe, with the aim of raising awareness in the EU institutions, bringing together actors from across Europe to come up with innovative solutions and policy recommendations on the topic. The report was written by two external consultants under the coordination of an EWL policy officer at the Secretariat in order to understand the phenomenon, identify current good practices, mapping legislations at EU and national level, and assessing burning issues, challenges and policy gaps (EWL report 2017). In the second stage of the project, a training at national level was designed, which gives activists and women in politics the technological tools available to protect themselves, and provides information on making online spaces safer for feminist activism (the pilot trainings takes place in Finland, Austria, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey) (EWL Secretariat 2). The EWL also passes on its knowledge and expertise by providing media training, with focus on social media and online abuse, to candidates running for the upcoming European Parliament elections. Overall, the project thus aids processes of policy learning and transfer, and has been described as an example of the 'ground-breaking work in new areas' the EWL Observatory undertakes with the help of its 'wide pool of expertise' (EWL Observatory expert 1). Trafficking and prostitution are closely related issues. The EWL's position on prostitution can serve as another example of transnational policy

learning. The legal approach to prostitution varies according to EU member state and national policy stances. In the Nordic region, there are important differences in prostitution regimes (for a comprehensive analysis see Skilbrei and Holmström 2013). The Swedish and Nordic model are often conflated, obscuring the differences behind the various types of legislative models. While Sweden led the way with client criminalisation in 1999, Norway and Iceland also adopted this model in 2008 and 2009 respectively, and Finland has done so partially in 2006 (Outshoorn 2018). Denmark on the other hand has adopted decriminalisation, following a neo-liberal logic that legitimises prostitution and treats prostitutes as independent contractors not regulated by the state or punished by authorities (Yttergren and Westerstrand 2016). The Swedish Women's Lobby and the Swedish government actively promote the abolitionist model abroad and the EWL has adopted this policy position in 1998, as it is seen to be the best policy solution to achieve gender equality, end violence against women, deter trafficking and contribute to women's and girls' economic and social liberation (EWL 2014). Uniting with traditional French abolitionists, Swedish left-wing feminists advanced the issue, resulting in a strong EWL resolution (Outshoorn 2005).

The EWL has been running the European-wide campaign 'Together for a Europe free of Prostitution' since 2010. It provides national NGOs with European-wide campaign material in order to support them nationally, while advocating for the abolition of prostitution at the EU-level. That the Nordic policy towards prostitution has been adopted as the EWL's position on the issue is vital to the Nordic members, and even a prerequisite for their membership, with one expert saying 'we would not be part of the EWL if its policy position on prostitution was any other than the abolitionist stance' (EWL Observatory expert 2). Another example of how learning is facilitated by the EWL can be found in several study trips and exchange programmes of delegations visiting other countries. In 2014, for example, the EWL's interim coordinator travelled to Norway and met with a series of stakeholders (especially partner NGOs) to discuss the Norwegian legislation on prostitution and trafficking. The trip was made in the knowledge that, even though Norway is not in the European Union, its policies concretely influence the rest of Europe (EWL 2014a). Thus, by promoting the abolitionist model of prostitution, the EWL's Nordic members have acted as norm entrepreneurs. This transnational learning and knowledge intermediation then feeds back into the grassroots level, with one front line activist explaining that reports like the 'Barometer on National Action Plans on VAW' (EWL Barometer 2011) are seen as important tools to 'shame our authorities because we did not have one [national action plan] and we could use the ideas from other countries of how it should look like' (EWL Observatory Nordic expert 3).

The EWL produces data and reports, which in conjunction with campaigning, can support the EWL's national coordinations in their domestic advocacy work. As part of an effort to improve the existing knowledge base and transfer data measurements and standardisations, the report 'Unveiling the hidden data of domestic violence in the EU', reviewed official data on domestic violence in 15 EU member states. The report pointed to the lack of adequate data and statistics on the incidence of violence against women and urged for development of good practices for data collection based upon research results. During the last two years, through the Daphne Programme, national

observatories on violence against women have been established in some member states, among those Denmark. A concrete example of the EWL's organisational learning through generating better data on VAW, the project focused on the ethical and practical issues of integrating sensitive questions on physical and sexual violence into national health interview surveys, thereby testing the feasibility of regular data collection on violence through health surveys in the member states. Danish representative at Observatory led the project and regularly updated the EWL on its findings.

5.3. Institutional transfer

A certain degree of transnational institutional transfer has taken place in the case of Sweden and Norway. The national women's umbrella organisations Swedish Women's Lobby and Norwegian Women's Lobby have been directly modelled on the EWL. The accession of Sweden to the EU played a crucial role in the establishment of the Swedish Women's Lobby (SWL) in 1997, which unites more than 40 Swedish women's movement organisations (Karlberg 2013). The name was chosen to correspond with the EWL's name. Today, the SWL is an established organisation seen as '*the representative and united voice*' (EWL Nordic member 3) of the Swedish women's movement. It is a relatively formal coalition organisation with a hierarchical structure of representation and decision making and it has its own office, employed staff and external funding. The Norwegian Women's Lobby (NWL) is an umbrella organisation for ten national women's rights organisations, and was founded in 2014. Through exchange of knowledge and experiences, members of the Swedish Women's Lobby gave decisive input and support to the NWL. The organisation is voluntary, all members work at other (women's) organisations. The NWL has modelled itself on the EWL and SWL. As the Norwegian government does not fund the organisation, the NWL needs to apply for external funding on an event and project basis, limiting the activities the NWL is able to perform. The focus lies on organising events and facilitating the exchange of ideas and knowledge. While there have been informal talks on officially joining the EWL (EWL Nordic member 4), at the time of writing, no concrete progress towards membership has been made. A certain degree of institutional transfer has also taken place in the case of the Observatory. A national Violence Observatory was created in Denmark in 1997. At first a working group of the Danish Women's Council, it was formalised and changed its name to National Violence Observatory. In Finland, a national Observatory on Violence Against Women and Girls was set up in 2005.

6. Findings and Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to map the opportunities for learning processes involved in the formation and knowledge intermediation that form the basis of the EWL's gender expertise. The analysis conducted addresses current debates on the role of expertise in policymaking and especially the role of transnational actors in international policy processes. The central argument has been that the EWL has adapted to an increased demand for expertise and specialised knowledge from the side

of EU institutions, by fostering mutual learning processes within the organisation and among gender advocates on the micro and meso-level. In order to better understand such processes, an important first step has been made here in mapping the opportunities for such processes. The empirical analysis showed that, through mechanisms of micro and meso-level learning, knowledge and expertise are shared between the different levels of the organisation, as well as shared and applied as part of the EWL gender expertise in a wider policy context, for example in gender training and in the development of new (activist) tools. The paper also shows that learning has not just resulted in the building of the EWL's capacities to engage with expertise-based policymaking, but in some cases in the institutional transfer of 'expert bodies' at the national level. The findings are a relevant contribution to the analysis of the politics-dimension of collective actors in the EU multi-level system and also point to the Europeanisation of national gender advocates. Moreover, the paper contributes to an understanding of learning and knowledge and policy 'transfer' that goes beyond the traditional narrow, state-centric perspective, but rather conceptualises CSOs as expertise-providers in EU governance.

The empirical analysis consisted of a case study of the Nordic members of the EWL and maps the opportunities for learning and knowledge intermediation. The expert interviews helped to illuminate how exactly multi-level processes of knowledge intermediation take place from an intra-organisational, actor-centred perspective. Some concrete examples and indicators of horizontal and vertical knowledge exchange and mutual learning were thereby identified. Expertise, specifically gender expertise, can make both a direct and more gradual indirect impact. Such diffuse and incremental influence of expertise can be found in perceptions and attitudes of policymakers or the wider public. This 'soft' transfer of ideas, best practices and norms is particularly evident in both case studies. The proliferation of the 'Swedish' abolitionist model as the European-wide policy the EWL advocates for is such an example. The case study also confirmed, as emphasised by scholars in previous research, that the 'Nordic model' falsely conflates the different national prostitution regimes in each of the Nordic countries. Swedish abolitionists have successfully promoted its model to prostitution strengthened through transnational alliances and expertise-based networking.

Overall, the Nordic members thus both fulfil the functions as role models but also gain a lot of 'usage' from their membership of the EWL. The case studies clearly show that rather than a uni-directional process of knowledge transfer from the Nordic members (knowledge holders) to other organisations (knowledge receivers), knowledge is intermediated and exchanged. The EWL thus functions as a site of innovation and mutual learning, which is reciprocal and reflexive. Through, for example, the Baltic partnership and the Observatory on Violence against Women, cognitive mechanisms such as learning, emulation and socialisation play a central role on the formation and sharing of the EWL's gender expertise (micro-level learning). Through the production of data, reports and statistics, the EWL's gender experts first engage in the standardisation of knowledge production, which is then used in the promotion of common (previously settled upon) understandings and interpretations of policy problems, as well as on the development of common tools (meso-level learning).

Regarding the normative debate around gender advocates' engagement in policymaking, the highly networked nature of EWL means that gender expertise is not an empty claim aimed at increasing participation in EU consultations. The EWL's feminist knowledge and gender expertise is actively created, codified, and shared through intra-organisational learning. By adopting an in-depth qualitative case study design, this paper has provided a first mapping of the opportunities for three types of learning (social, political and organisational) within the EWL, which generate the EWL's gender expertise. Future research should then systematically investigate how learning affects CSOs' role as expertise providers and knowledge actors in EU governance, contributing to macro-level (EU-system-level) learning. The EWL's and other CSOs' participation in EU expert committees could also be of interest for future studies. Another avenue of inquiry might be the measuring of the degree of transfer of specific policy ideas over time, or conduct large-N, comparative, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies in order to detect patterns of learning within the wider EU transnational advocacy network and policy context of gender-related issues.

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Appendix: Interviews

Due to the limited number of staff working in each of the EWL's Nordic member organisations and Nordic Observatory experts, the interviews have been fully anonymised, and are not referred to by country.

EWL Nordic member 1: 20. October 2016

EWL Nordic member 2: 25. October 2016

EWL Nordic member 3: 28. October 2016

EWL Nordic member 4: 09. December 2016

EWL Nordic member 5: 10. January 2017

EWL Secretariat 1: 20. March 2017

EWL Observatory Nordic expert 1: 04. January 2019

EWL Observatory Nordic expert 2: 15. January 2019

EWL Observatory Nordic expert 3: 01. February 2019

EWL Secretariat 2: 05. February 2019

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