

## **POLITICS OF ENGAGEMENT:**

### **GENDER EXPERTISE AND INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE**

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This paper studies the workings of gender experts and expertise in international institutions of governance. Moving beyond binaries, such as those on the inside of hegemonic institutions versus outside or co-optation versus activism, I use processes of instrumentalization as a vantage point to lay out the multiple paths emerging in micro-political encounters. I propose to think of micropolitical tensions, ambivalences and contradictions in terms of *politics of engagement*. First, arguing that the boundaries between inside and outside institutions and positions are not that clear cut because actors circulate between them, I show how gender experts instrumentalize their own changing positions to enhance power in current settings. Second, I focus on instrumentalist discourses and trace their emergence in unequal negotiations. I show how gender experts can become part of processes that they also critique. Finally, I discuss a set of strategies where experts instrumentalize the same institutional inequalities to their advantage to produce diverse political possibilities with open-ended outcomes.

On the morning of 8 March 2018, in celebration of International Women’s Day, the World Trade Organization (WTO) organized a high-level event at its premises facing Lake Geneva. The event closely followed the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment, announced during the November 2017 WTO Buenos Aires Ministerial Conference – a document, signed by more than 100 states, formally acknowledging the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in trade policies and the role that inclusive trade could play in achieving gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, a gender focal point was assigned within the WTO for the first time in its history. These events appeared to suggest the tide had turned in an organization with a history of neoclassical economic convictions and little attention to the gendered dimensions of economic policy making. Furthermore, the capacity

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<sup>1</sup> For the WTO declaration, which consisted of a pledge to share experiences and best practices, and work together, see [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/minist\\_e/mc11\\_e/genderdeclarationmc11\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc11_e/genderdeclarationmc11_e.pdf)

audience on the morning of March 8 suggested that NGOs, government representatives and gender experts in Geneva were willing to engage with this institutional shift.

At the time of the panel, copies of another document were placed on a table near the entrance to the room. This was the second declaration signed in Buenos Aires by more than 160 women's rights organizations, which encouraged governments *not to join* the WTO declaration. While the signatories expressed appreciation that governments were finally recognizing that trade has a gendered impact, these groups stated that the joint declaration did not address how WTO rules deepened global inequalities.<sup>2</sup> This was thus a discussion where one of the parties chose not to be in the room, suspicious of being instrumentalized and co-opted, and wary that it was unlikely to have any impact: a silent engagement, which the people entering the room could witness if they stopped by the table and picked up a copy.

These two events, happening simultaneously in the same room but worlds apart, were reminiscent of feminist literature, which has a long history of debating what happens when feminists enter and interact with institutions of governance and capitalist actors that might benefit from and be part of the architecture of existing gender inequalities (Sawer, 1990; Eisenstein, 1996). Feminist scholars who discuss the uneasy incorporation of seemingly-feminist ideas in states, international development institutions and corporate discourses warn against depoliticization, instrumentalization and co-optation, a process that defangs egalitarian and liberating possibilities (Fraser, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Mukhopadhyay, 2016[2004]). Yet there is also a burgeoning literature that problematizes the binary of co-optation inside and purity of feminism outside / in the past (De Jong, 2016; Prügl, 2009; True and Parisi, 2013; Rao and Sandler, 2016).

In this paper, my objective is to contribute to feminist writing, which argues that claims of divisions between feminist bureaucrats (or gender experts) and feminist activists are overstated; under-specifying the level of strategic collusion between them and the conflicts within each group (Rai2003; Rao 2006; Banaszak 2010; Prügl, 2012; Razavi, 2012). I assert the need to listen to narratives deployed by gender experts, who are often aware of their critics (Eschle and Manguashca, 2007; Ferguson 2015; De Jong, 2018). I propose thinking of their strategies, and the meanings experts attribute to them, in terms of *politics of engagement*, encompassing micro-

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<sup>2</sup> For the NGO declaration, see <http://craadoi-mada.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Statement-on-WTO.pdf>

political encounters involving different institutional positions, hegemonic narratives and non-feminist others. I choose this terminology rather than co-optation in response to two interrelated calls in the literature: the need for nuanced analysis of the unstable boundaries between institutions and movements (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2007; Sandler and Rao, 2012; Rao and Sandler, 2016; de Jong and Kimm, 2017), and for writing that neither vilifies nor romanticizes what is being done in the name of gender expertise or advocacy (Gouws, 1996; Swan and Fox, 2010; Calkin, 2015).

I trace the unfolding of politics of engagement through the trope of instrumentalization, which is central to critiques of the co-optation of feminism by neoliberal agendas (Bergeron 2003; Griffin, 2009; Razavi, 2012; Chant, 2012; Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Roberts 2015). I illuminate three paths through which instrumentalization enters institutional work and discourse. I connect these to different types of micropolitical encounters, making up the multi-layered and ambiguous nature of politics of engagement. One of these paths narrows the possibilities for political change toward gender equality while the two others produce more uncertain results. These three paths develop as gender experts strategically utilize their own circulations in and outside institutions of governance, produce logics that hinge on hegemonic narratives in institutions where they are subordinate, and exploit inequalities between institutions to their advantage. The choices resulting in these paths are shaped by the unequal opportunity structures that many actors perceive in their temporal and spatial positions inside and outside these institutions (Pini et al., 2008).

The WTO event mentioned earlier sets the stage both in terms of these questions and because of where it took place. This was but one of many events in Geneva on gender equality and women's rights, signifying the prominence of such debates among the international institutions concentrated in the city.<sup>3</sup> There is a proliferation of reporting on gender equality, reflecting a discernible increase in gender divisions in organizations, ranging from those specializing in humanitarian relief to economic development, and from technical assistance to rights-based advocacy. The fact that the periodic Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) meetings moved to Geneva in 2011 along with the expanded authority of the Human Rights Commission in 2006 bolster the continuous visibility of questions of women's rights and gender equality. These moves have made possible more regular and structured access

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<sup>3</sup> In Geneva, another channel was the launch of International Gender Champions in 2015. This is a network composed of the heads of organizations, agencies and permanent missions in Geneva, who make public pledges toward gender equality in their organizations. See <https://genderchampions.com/about>

for civil society organizations than they find in CSW meetings. In addition, the UN's second UN-System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP-2) was launched in 2017 following the completion of UN-SWAP-1.<sup>4</sup> The stand-alone UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for gender equality is also a significant incentive for institutions to incorporate gender into their work.

This article is based on research conducted in Geneva during 2017 and 2018 on the workings of gender expertise in international governance. During this period, I reviewed reports on gender equality and women's empowerment produced by various institutions, including but not limited to the UNDP, UN Women, ILO and the World Bank. I conducted 40 interviews with gender experts, asking them about their fields of specialization, experiences in their current and prior institutions, and interactions with multiple actors in the governance system. I also collected ethnographic material during events in Geneva regarding gender, development and rights. It is through the interviews and ethnographic observations that the manifold meanings and possibilities of in gender expert work became discernible.<sup>5</sup>

In the next section, I situate this paper in a dialogue with the literature on feminist actors and international governance, which emphasizes the need to move beyond binaries. In the subsequent sections, I first explore the collective biographies of the interviewees to suggest that their repertoire of circulation between institutions and positions complicates assumptions of inside versus outside. These circulations become instrumental for building alliances that can push for institutional change. I then discuss the strategies gender experts use to convince non-feminist others about the work they do, which reframe feminist terminology in ways that appear to fit with institutional mandates. These strategies, deployed under unequal circumstances, result in the

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<sup>4</sup>See for a history and evaluations of UN-SWAP 1 and 2: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/un-system-coordination/promoting-un-accountability>.

<sup>5</sup> I used multiple entry points into the field, followed by snowballing. Beginning with the UNDP, UN Women, ILO and the World Bank, which have been prolific on issues of gender and development, I then branched out to others, including three additional groups of experts in specialized institutions within the UN system; major humanitarian relief organizations; and those with experience in the CEDAW committee and Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) negotiations. 20 interviewees were in Switzerland, 10 in the USA, and the rest in various capital cities of the Global North and South. The pool of interviewees was evenly divided between mid-level and high-level professional positions, also including directorial positions. Of the forty interviewees, 3 were men and the rest were women. Half of the group were in their fifties and above, and they were mostly in high level-professional or directorial positions. The half in their mid-thirties and forties were spread across mid- and high-level professional positions.

frequently criticized issue of instrumentalization. Finally, I highlight a set of strategies where gender experts use to their advantage the inequalities between institutions and departments, which do not always have to be doing feminist work. This strategy of instrumentalization produces more open-ended results, with potential for changing power dynamics.

### **Politics of Engagement and Feminist Debates**

There is a long history of discussions on what institutionalization does to feminism, tracing the interaction between feminist mobilization and institutions of national and international governance (Eisenstein, 1990; Sawer, 1990; Gouws, 1996; Rai 2003; Pini et al., 2008). Scholars have discussed how the bureaucratization of feminist advocacy through gender mainstreaming has contributed to its depoliticization and co-optation (Mukhopadhyay 2016[2004]; Prügl, 2009; True and Parisi 2013). Failures have been attributed to its constitution as a technology that assimilates feminist ideas into institutions (Brush, 2003; Prügl, 2011). Mukhopadhyay has depicted how gender mainstreaming transforms state institutions' relations with another and feminist advocacy groups, while also exhausting feminist activism (2016).

Similarly, in the development realm, feminists have pointed out the ways in which feminist discourses can be co-opted by the neoliberal paradigm (Chant, 2012; Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Elias, 2013; Parisi, 2006; Roberts, 2015). Scholars have shown how international development programs and discourses consequently position women as instruments through which other development goals are achieved, with essentialist gender assumptions being reinforced in the process (Bedford, 2009; Griffin, 2009; Razavi, 1999, 2012, 2013). These studies document the structural inequalities that can absorb or shut out the demands of feminist activism and the dangers inherent in navigating (often anti-feminist and anti-egalitarian) institutional worlds. They are also relevant for the larger world of international governance of development, whereby other knowledges are seen to be co-opted into existing institutional logics (Goldman, 2006; Klein, 2017; Fine et al., 2016).

At a practical level, however, the question is whether complete disengagement from institutions of power is feasible or not (Miller and Razavi, 1998; True, 2003). Furthermore, the idea of a binary of co-optation inside institutions of governance and ideological purity on the outside assumes there is/was a pure and monolithic feminist knowledge and activism outside institutional frameworks (Eschle and Maignashca, 2014; Calkin 2015; de Jong, 2016). This

assumption makes it hard to recognize the complex connections between the history of feminist mobilizations and national and international institutions: the ability of women's movements to influence the structure and agenda of the UN system is a history of intricate contestations, alliances and victories (Antrobus, 2004; Hannan, 2013; Rai, 2004). Furthermore, this depiction is also less likely to account for internal conflicts and divisions in social movements and civil society (Alvarez 1999; Alvarez et al., 2003; Maiguashca, 2011; Eschle and Maiguashca, 2014).

Thus, feminist scholars also assert that it is necessary to move beyond arguments of co-optation and study how gender experts work within governance mechanisms (Cornwall et al., 2007; Rai and Waylen, 2008; Çağlar et al., 2013a). Prügl, for instance, argues that there is a world of power politics beyond a simple notion of co-optation, both inside and around institutions of governance. Therefore, studying expert strategies allows us to understand what they make possible politically and what they preclude (2016). These accounts are bolstered by calls for understanding the everyday contradictions in institutional life (Ferguson 2015; Hudson and Goetz, 2014; Li, 2007; Lewis and Mosse, 2006). Studies show that gender experts have to simultaneously draw from, negotiate with and challenge hegemonic ideologies (Çağlar et al., 2013b; Hannan, 2013; Zwingel, 2013). Accordingly, everyday processes of negotiating, performing and decision making inside international institutions is a far cry from the world that critical scholarship imagines: scholars and activists do not have clearly demarcated outside positions to those of policy makers or insiders; rather, people shift discourses and positions, alliances are made, unmade and remade, and people seek authority for multiple reasons (Desai and Schomerus, 2017).

Thus, it is these unstable boundaries, changing alliances and accompanying strategies that need to be studied (Sandler and Rao, 2012; Rao and Sandler, 2016). Striedinger suggests tracing the links between micro-level processes, organizational procedures and larger societal structures (2017). Eschle and Maiguashca affirm the need to build a multi-layered analysis that reconceptualizes feminism *and* neoliberalism in a less monolithic manner by disaggregating multiple and ambiguous trajectories (2018). Similarly, De Jong and Kimm push us to apply a nuanced and structured interrogation of what exactly happens in processes lumped under co-optation (2017). There is something else also emphasized in these calls: the importance of listening to personal experiences and how individuals narrate their own presence in institutional settings (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2007; Ferguson, 2015; Hudson and Goetz, 2014; De Jong, 2018). It is in micro-political strategies and the ways in which participants make sense of them that we can

understand the multiplicity of sites of encounter and contestation (Eyben, 2012; Rao and Sandler, 2016).

In this paper, I want to contribute to these calls by focusing on the choices that gender experts make in their work and how they explain these choices. To this end, I use the term politics of engagement to indicate a range of micro-political interactions and associated strategies. My objective is to study what happens inside institutions as different actors and agendas interact with each other, without losing sight of the critical analysis that arguments of co-optation make possible (Striedinger, 2017). Therefore, I focus specifically on the trope of instrumentalization, which the literature clarifies as an indicator of the way feminist agendas are co-opted, diluted and distorted (Bergeron, 2003; Fraser, 2009; Bedford, 2009; Chant, 2012; Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Roberts, 2015). I look at gender experts' engagements with activist networks, colleagues within their current institutional spaces, and other institutions and departments. I suggest that experts utilize their own pasts of multiple positionalities to increase authority in their current jobs; reframe feminist objectives in ways that fit with internal hegemonic discourses; and manipulate inequalities between institutions and departments to push for their objectives.

The politics of engagement, in other words, is intended to capture the shifting meaning of “the other” and the very different micropolitical interactions depending on positions of relative power, ideology and interests. Attention to this multiplicity disassembles and reassembles dichotomies, shedding light on shifting spaces for manoeuvre and changes in power constellations. Studying the politics of engagement in this manner can capture the complexity of outcomes and reveal a clearer picture of accountabilities and political possibilities, without vilifying or romanticizing this institutional work (Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Li, 2007; Desai and Schomerus, 2017).

### **Circulations: Moving beyond Co-optation and Advocacy**

One interviewee, who had participated in writing the WTO declaration mentioned earlier, told me that although she did not seek to become a poster child for neoliberalism, she saw here an opportunity to facilitate change:

I said to them [the writers of the second declaration] they should have picked up the phone and said, “Unless you have this and that in there, we’ll do a declaration.”

I would have tried, I would have failed, but then they could have said, “This doesn’t

work unless you have that.” But instead, they just said, “This is bad...” They could have been in the room. They chose not to be in the room.

In this moment, this interviewee was simultaneously defending herself (i.e. that she had not abandoned the feminist cause) and criticizing those who “chose not to be in the room”. Despite this contrast of outside versus inside, empirically speaking, there were no such pure positions among the people with whom I talked. Those who worked officially with various institutions of the UN or Bretton Woods system often remarked that they were on the inside, but not *insiders*. Several studies on gender expert work in international projects capture this complex position. Experts find themselves being encouraged to use arguments that will make sense in the headquarters, even though these reduce tremendously their own perceptions of achievement on the ground (Bedford, 2009). It has been documented as a frustrating process whereby one’s individually subordinate situation inside the institution influences what can be voiced (Ferguson, 2015). This is partly why people weave in and out of these positions, negotiating personal convictions and institutional prerogatives (Hudson and Goetz, 2014).

A reflection of these practices of circulation is to be discovered in the collective biographies of the interviewees. At the time of the interviews, the majority were employed full time in international institutions. However, 15 had PhDs and prior research positions, showing the circulation between academia and international and national governance. Furthermore, at some point in their lives, at least half had also been in Southern feminist organizations and/or other organizations that challenge the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions. Their personal biographies also cut across binaries. For one thing, of the forty interviewees, twenty were born and raised in countries of the Global South. Half were in their fifties and beyond. Unsurprisingly, these were the ones who had circulated the most, having been part of feminist networks during the UN Conferences. Those in their thirties and in their forties had more limited experience with multiple positions, with a few working in specialized agencies, several had only worked in one institution. None of this was the result of purposive sampling on my part.

For the older generation, the circulations between institutions and positions with different (and sometimes oppositional) mandates have unfolded in tandem with a history that goes back to the UN conferences of the 1980s and 1990s (Antrobus, 2004; Moghadam, 2005). On the one hand, they opened doors for feminists to enter the arenas of international governance. On the other hand,

they also highlighted tensions around intra-movement power inequalities because those who could access positions of power were almost always the ones who could speak the language of governance (Alvarez, 1999; Alvarez et al., 2003; Narayanaswamy, 2015). Nevertheless, the unfolding of these alliances and contestations revealed how institutional boundaries do not remain stable.

Interviewees, who had participated in the UN Conferences, often described the feminists formed networks through them, against the politics of the very institutions they were engaging with in these fora. One such network was the Women's Eyes on the Bank, established during the 1995 Beijing Conference in response to the newly appointed President of the World Bank's promise to ensure women's empowerment through World Bank development programming. The campaign aimed to keep the bank accountable by monitoring its initiatives to increase grassroots women's participation in economic policy making, institutionalize a gender perspective and increase investments in areas like health, education, agriculture, women's land ownership, employment and access to finance (Williams, 1997). One interviewee told me of the moment in which their critique opened the door to walk into the "heart of the beast".

In the '90s, the network that I was part of was writing critiques ... things like "we wish the World Bank an unhappy birthday" because they were, in our eyes, wrecking the position of women in all countries where they were. Then the next thing you see we were invited to become Women's Eyes on the World Bank. James Wolfensohn invited us to at least be part of the World Bank rigmarole and advise them, et cetera, et cetera.

Another told me of how, more than a decade ago, the WTO had invited feminist NGOs as part of its policy of engaging with civil society:

Right around the first trade ministerial, to which a lot of organizations – DAWN, WIDE, WIEDO – had gone and tried to raise a lot of issues, I had a mandate in my organization to deal with gender and trade. So, we were asking each other, "How could we tackle this new entity, the WTO?" We went to them and I remember there were like four lawyers in the room, along with the head of Trade and Development Unit and someone from NGO External Relations. ... We had a little briefing paper that we presented. They listened; they were very polite, and then they said, "We

think you should be talking to the World Bank ... because trade is neutral. Trade is technical!”

This same person remembered another meeting where she was invited to speak on the gendered dimensions of economic policy making. She was preceded by another speaker, a diplomat, who defined gender as a philosophical rather than economic issue. These exchanges were emblematic of these institutional worlds where, because development is defined in terms of economic growth and efficiency, most insiders do not even believe that gender experts belong there. Nevertheless, these initial exchanges led to invitations to participate in NGO meetings and opportunities to speak at ministerial meetings (because the WTO leadership was also concerned about the criticism they were getting from activists worldwide). Consequently, several people today within the WTO and others, such as the UNCTAD and the ITC, are vociferously arguing that trade is *not* gender-neutral.

This change was partly the result of these circulating positions, where advocates became experts, experts left to join academia and research institutes, and research institutes received funding from the organizations whose politics some staff members found problematic. Confrontation and critique were important forms of engagement that could also lead to other collaborative engagements (and associated risks). One expert, who had taken part in UN conferences as part of a feminist network, had worked in both academia and research institutes but was now affiliated with a UN institution. She told me:

I come back to the UN 20 years later and it's amazing as far as I'm concerned. In the 90s, we had fights to even say the word gender or women's rights in the IMF, World Bank and so forth. And then now, you can't open a single book or leaflet without seeing gender and gender equality in there ... We have managed that – as the women's movement, we have managed to get gender into international governance.

When I asked her later how it felt to have shifted into an institution whose practice she might have been criticizing in a past life, she, like others, talked about the need to have people like her inside even though she also observed that she was responsible for a tiny section of a huge enterprise. She also added that, for her, at that moment in her life, it made sense personally. The emergence of similar themes in other interviewees suggest that these shifts between positions bring with them continuous personal questioning and tentative resolutions that it is better for them to be inside than

others. Furthermore, these circulations also impact the way people talked about dissent, revealing multiple ambiguous actor-positions: Outsiders, part of feminist movements, were considered allies when experts identified with their political goals. The same outsiders could be depicted as too radical when they were perceived to not understand the complexities of institutional work. Younger generations of gender experts were also allies, but they could also be depicted as too professionalized. Institutional actors were described either as the internal others because they resisted the interviewees' agendas or people who needed support in their own journeys toward gender equality. All these descriptions depended situation being described and the degree of friction interviewees experienced.

Those interviewees who had built their careers in one institutional setting or had less of a history of connections with feminist movements were also aware of the critiques. Some brought up their technical expertise as an advantage through which they could garner support from the inside. Some criticized those on the outside for unrealistic expectations. Yet, there was always a sense of injury, whether people were connected to feminist advocacy or not, whether people defined themselves explicitly as feminist or used terms such gender experts or officers interested in issues of gender. This was because everyone saw themselves as fighting battles that many on the outside were not aware of. Especially for those who had been activists and/or critical scholars before joining these institutions, this was never an easy process. As a former director, who at the time of the interview had an academic position, put it:

I've been thinking about this a lot lately, especially at the CSW. Feminists who are attracted to institutional work, who decide to go inside are usually ... well, very traumatized by the binary, this inside-outside tension. I certainly was. They don't see themselves as separate from the outside. They don't see themselves as separate from civil society at all. They see themselves as still activists, only on the inside.

This narrative echoes feminist writing discussing the problematic divisive outcomes of assuming strict divisions between those on the inside and outside of international institutions (Eschle and Manguerra 2014; Striedinger 2017). These actors felt a need not only to maintain ties with the outside and draw on them for alliances but also to convince those on the outside that they were still allies and were doing good work under constrained circumstances (de Jong, 2016).

The earlier interviewee who had been part of a Southern feminist organization and was invited to participate in World Bank activities went on to tell me stories of how this work of sustaining alliances happened on multiple fronts, cutting across the boundaries of international governance, states and feminist advocates, partly due to individuals who circulated between them. She told me also of how Beijing was the outcome of such circulations, where feminist groups could rely on insiders in the state delegations to get what they wanted. One gender expert, whose career has spanned participation in multilateral trade negotiations, consultancies for national governments and research, told me that in her work at an intergovernmental organization, she needs to be officially invited by local stakeholders or the state to conduct their activities. Often, she relied on her own past in feminist networks to get these invitations. Another who had moved between diplomacy, private sector and international governance said, “We don’t have to all do the same thing. It’s like a siege thing, right? If all of us are digging at one little tunnel and then if they close it, we’ll never get into the city.” In fact, many wanted to convey to me, reflecting also feminist writing on femocrats, that they could only get work done when they were able to build alliances across the institutional boundaries due to their own pasts of having crossed them (Sawer, 1990; Rao, 2006; Sandler and Rao, 2014 & 2016).

According to these narratives, positions were not purist; there were circulations back and forth, without a clearly dichotomous position of advocacy at one end and co-optation at the other. A feminist economist, whose institutional work involved intense engagement with civil society organizations, after telling me that she could also turn to these networks for pressure she needed, reflected on the ambiguity of her position:

There’s always this dual tendency: ... doing something mainstream because that’s what gives you power, and you can speak to institutions of power. And maybe change institutions of power: change them from within. But at the same time, keeping your connection to the alternative, and being fed both intellectually and spiritually and as a person, as an activist.

These experiences attest to De Jong’s emphasis that “a realization that the main/stream itself never runs clean and cannot be purely hegemonic might encourage a search for the cracks and interstices where gender mainstreaming could be placed as a productively complicit intervention” (2016, p. 102). The interpretations gender experts offer of their own careers emphasize the strategies they

deploy in these positions and how the boundaries between the inside and the outside in terms of power are never clear. Their own circulations in and out of institutional positions are productive of strategies that can be utilized to change institutional discourses and practices or end up reinforcing existing power inequalities. These are possibilities likely for other advocacy areas, as well, where actors crisscross institutions, have to respond to changing constraints and opportunity structures, and strategize against diverse types of dissent throughout their careers.

### **Adopting the Message: Instrumentalist Logics of Ambiguity**

In the previous section, success was defined in terms of changing the language used in policy documents or creating dents in the hegemonic narratives of institutions. However, one could also conceptualize success, in terms of the degree to which people inside these institutions change or the type of actual impact on the world outside. Interviewees were also aware of the critiques voiced against the damaging ways in which gender was taken up in international governance. When they reflected on such outcomes, there was often a recognition of the ways in which people could become part of the system they are trying to change. Gender regimes in their organizations, official mandates as well as tacit scripts interacted to dictate acceptable frames (Connell, 2006; Chappell, 2006; Chappell and Mackay, 2017; Krook and MacKay, 2011; Waylen, 2014). These often shifted the implications of the language they were able to get into policy documents.

The interviewee who talked about how being seen as part of the problem was traumatic continued:

The problem, I suppose, with the institutionalization of gender work or the women's rights work in international institutions, or multilateral institutions ... is that you get non-feminists working on women's rights. Or people with zero background or commitment in civil society.

In many interviews, such as this one, non-feminist others or those who had no idea what gender expertise entailed emerged as the audience to be convinced. To that end, the constantly repeated narrative was the need to adapt the message. One former activist told me that it takes time for institutions to change. Another, who had worked in the same agency for more than a decade before being tasked to steer the gender department, explained she has to proceed cautiously because “[w]e don't have the mandate to work on these issues so if [anyone opposes], then I have to stop, basically”. A third, whose career had spanned diplomacy, international governance and non-

governmental institutions, challenged my question by saying “being consistent and coherent is easier said than done”, and that it is not necessarily wrong “to adapt your message depending on the audience. It’s just pragmatism.” These reactions affirmed gender experts’ need to negotiate with multiple stakeholders, including those in their own institutions, who are likely to consider feminism irrelevant or whose deployment of gender terminology leaves a lot to be desired (Ferguson, 2015; Goetz, 2006; Hudson and Goetz, 2014).

In the interviews, there were always stories of internal battles to convince colleagues that gender work is relevant and necessary. There were subtle differences in the narratives, with respect to institutional settings. People who wanted to connect their work to feminist advocacy on the outside differentiated between departments in the same institutions. They also saw their work as sometimes contradicting what others were doing elsewhere and at other times, when opportune, challenging them. In environments where expertise is strictly defined in terms of neoclassical economics, law or humanitarian crisis management, people said that carving out a space for gender equality and women’s rights often involves coming up with more institutionally acceptable and recognizable concepts.

Instrumentalist logics often were introduced in these moments to the interviews. One gender expert, who had worked in various development agencies within the UN but was now working for a research institute, first told me of her goal to centralize social provisioning in economic calculations. As a feminist economist, she said, she wanted to challenge the dominant paradigms of neoliberalism. When I asked her how she did that, she laughed and said that, in her everyday work, she would never start with how calculations of economic activity are misguided:

I wouldn’t approach a policy maker with a social provisioning argument because I think it is still seen very much as a theoretical and philosophical concept. We often end up engaging on the instrumental argument, just because it makes more sense to the policy makers whose horizons are shorter.

As indicated before, one of the most vociferous critiques against development institutions is their instrumentalist reasoning when it comes to gender equality and women’s empowerment, which services market-driven definitions of development rather than women (Bergeron, 2003; Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Elias, 2013; Prügl, 2012). In my reading of the World Bank, ILO, UNDP and the UN Women reports, I saw that the reports have shifted from a dominant “smart economics”

approach to one that still uses it but alongside assertions of women's rights and statements that it is "the right thing to do". Razavi (2012) also noted this change in the World Bank Development Report 2012, even though she argues that the change is still too little. She has also written on the problems of instrumentalist approaches while acknowledging the need to use them in a principled manner (Razavi, 1997 and 2017).

Several people reported the problems they had with instrumentalist arguments, although they often found themselves in positions where they either used it themselves or were silent in the face of others doing so. People also simplified the message; used terminology that would gain them greater traction than equality and rights; or left the definition of the terms ambiguous. This all arose from a need to frame claims in ways that could garner institutional support and build alliances (Goetze and Jenkins, 2018). Some saw their institutional roles as opening up spaces so that others on the outside could more easily demand rights. For others, who wanted to expand the mandate, using institutionally recognizable frames was a strategy to carve out a space for gender expertise, even if the space had to be constantly renegotiated and reasserted.

One feminist economist quipped that the term empowerment had become popular because it was flexible enough to be defined in different ways, ranging from being associated with equality to having legal rights, from political participation to employment, from individual access to economic resources to having respect in the family. A gender expert who had run multiple programs on women's entrepreneurship around the world told me that, in several countries where he had worked, he could not really run a program called women's rights or gender equality, although the governments concerned loved the optics of a program on women's empowerment through entrepreneurship. While this was partially due to the instrumentalist logic of state officers, there was also something else: a former diplomat, who had also worked within the UN system, told me that she had sat through many encounters with various governments "where women's empowerment is acceptable, but gender equality is not". These strategies of developing instrumentalist arguments and ambiguous frames are all the truer in a world where there is a backlash against feminism and its institutionalized gains (Kováts, and Põim 2015; Graff et. Al. 2019; Gökarıksel et al., 2019). This is the world in which instrumentalist logics and ambiguous terms end up being deemed less "controversial" than others (Haynes 2013; Wiener, 2009).

People also recounted stories of developing informal alliances to introduce other concepts and using a rights-based language alongside a more economic conceptualization. This strategic but precarious deployment of ambiguity is reminiscent of ethnographic work on development programs, where people at every level of an organization have different understandings of gender, empowerment, equality or development. Consequently, the outcome often reflects not what progressive actors intend but rather the framing of the most powerful in these hierarchies (Ferguson, 2010, Cornwall and Rivas, 2015, Cornwall, 2016). In this sense, instrumentalist and ambiguous frames are the outcome of manoeuvres to engage with the powerful, but they also represent a double-edged sword that can reproduce existing power inequalities.

During my research, one of the things I quickly found out was that even though a lot of gender talk happens in Geneva (as well as elsewhere), the money earmarked for addressing problems of gender equality and women's rights is nowhere near comparable to the intensity of the talk. Thus, many acknowledged the fierce competition for outside funding, with some very uncomfortable results. One, talking about the corporate partnerships of UN Women, said the following:

When you're engaging with corporations, they don't do this because they love gender equality. They do this because they're going to get more bottles of Coke sold. That's a cynical point of view but I have absolutely no illusions that corporate engagement in women's rights has any purpose other than improving market share. How do we end up in an alliance with Avon make-up, with Johnson & Johnson, with Coca Cola? ... I wish I could say that these kinds of decisions are taken thoughtfully and with deep internal debate. ... I suspect a lot of decisions are taken on the basis of a very attractive pitch in the office of the executive director. The next thing you know, we've agreed to something which gives us nothing but gives them huge publicity.

The danger that this interviewee was voicing concerned the relative lack of control over the outcomes that instrumentalist logics ultimately produce. Swan and Fox (2010) show how the racialized and gendered bodies of diversity officers in corporations often become a token response by senior management to demands for diversity, even if the officers resist these understandings. Similarly, in these cases, the careful strategies, corresponding to experts' unequal positions, could

also mean that questions of gender equality, feminist goals *and* the gender experts could end up being instrumentalized by the very actors and processes that produce the problems they are fighting against. In one of the interviews, a feminist economist questioned whether the existing power structures that they had to accept meant that their gender expertise was being instrumentalized. When I asked her what she meant by this, she told me that she had participated in various multilateral negotiations in trade, climate change and development financing. She said, tongue-in-cheek, that people came up with a gender declaration in these negotiations when they cannot agree on anything else: that is, gender becomes the instrument to cover up a failure to agree on the actual issues of the negotiations.

De Jong (2017), in her study of women who work in international NGOs situated primarily in the Global North, suggests that these actors hold multiple subject positions. They resist racialized hierarchies, but also occasionally reproduce them. Their work aims to challenge the inequalities between the North and the South, but they also continue to be a product of them. Calling them “complicit sisters”, she shows the dilemmas and the uneasy identity work these positions involve. One result of this, she suggests, is the “race to innocence”; that is, her interviewees frequently deploy narratives that emphasize their intention to do good and their own subordinate positions within bureaucratic frameworks. These narratives, too, show that women and men working in the governance of gender across the international terrain engage with ideologies from which they want to keep varied distances.

Their multifaceted politics of engagement can produce many mid-level outcomes, which range from contributing to instrumentalist arguments to remaining ambiguous, from silence to collaboration. These outcomes themselves can occupy different spaces in the governance of gender, from facilitating reproduction of mainstream economic models to mainstreaming gender. Although the people I talked with made sure they conveyed stories of how they had not been co-opted, they were constantly reflecting on the possibility. As this last story suggests, the interviewees were aware that strategies to make gender an accepted part of institutional mandates could end up converting it into a type of commitment that will be less likely to be implemented the way it should and become an apolitical smokescreen for failures to reach consensus on other matters. This was a risk many ended up taking to generate positions of authority for themselves and their agendas in the longer term.

## **Instrumentalizing Inequalities between Institutions and Departments**

In the previous section, I explored instrumentalist discourses as an outcome from which I backtracked to the unequal institutional settings that constrain gender expertise. In this section, I return to instrumentalizing as a process. I discuss how experts utilize inequalities between institutions and departments, not physically present in the micropolitical encounters, to shift power to their advantage.

One interviewee working in the World Bank said that they do not use rights-based arguments with government officers because

It's not our competitive advantage ... We're certainly not as well versed in a rights-based framework. ... [B]ecause our focus is economic, it makes a lot of sense for us to focus on economic empowerment. ... And it actually helps when you are talking to stakeholders on the ground: civil society organizations and others. These are things they are advocating for – we bring a little bit of an economics into it basically.

This interviewee explained that the data they introduced could actually help other stakeholders fighting for the same things from a different angle. When I probed whether other factors, besides the economic rationale, could make the World Bank more effective, she said that perhaps it also had to do with the fact that they could get airtime with the more powerful ministries in any country, such as finance, trade and labour.

Because the World Bank can facilitate access to finance for cash-strapped governments, the latter are more inclined to listen to what its officers have to say. Interestingly, experts in other institutions, who do not always have the same level of access or, even when they do, their organizations do not have the same kind of clout, told me stories of how they engage the World Bank in making their arguments. One feminist economist, after recounting several stories where she problematized the WTO, World Bank and the IMF, told me that she liked using World Bank publications in her meetings with governments:

If they're the Finance Ministry, they'll say, "There's no analytical reason for this." You say, "World Bank," and their eyes pop out: "World Bank actually did something on this?" ... So, you start with those and then you say, "UNCTAD".

“UNCTAD really?” “Yeah.” I do have a lot of problems with the World Bank, but if I’m talking to somebody in finance, believe me I’m going to be saying “the World Bank did this and this is what the World Bank said”, and so forth. I’ll nuance it later on, but I will go there. You telling them somebody at Harvard or Cambridge has done research doesn’t help because their pressure point is not Harvard or Cambridge. Their pressure point is the World Bank, IMF, WTO, USAID, EU, ASEAN – any of the big ones who will fund the projects. That’s leverage, right?

Accordingly, the World Bank (or any of the powerful funding institutions) could influence engagements between state parties and gender experts in various institutions and tilt the balance of power a bit. People often used documents produced by organizations that they simultaneously critiqued. Some brought up the 2015 McKinsey report, written by the consultancy firm, which argues that if countries closed gender gaps in labour force participation, hours of paid work and productivity, world GDP would grow by 26% (Woetzel et al., 2015). Several interviewees questioned the report’s expectations that these jobs can be created, its lack of attention to unpaid care labour and whether it was reasonable to insist on an economic model predicated on infinite growth. Yet, one interviewee also said she liked the fact that women’s empowerment was now everywhere, including in this report. Another described how the numbers in the report became part of her repertoire of arguments. The World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Report was also brought up a few times. Interviewees both criticized its reductive approach while also recognizing how local feminist advocates could use the report to make demands from national governments. The instrumentalization tactic that operates here is making use of the affinities in the discourses of powerful actors that are not actively part of the conversation.

Similarly, when engaging with donors, people reported instances of using a language the donors could more easily recognize. Others talked about stories of oversimplification to fit in with expectations across the table. One said that engaging with donors meant they constantly needed to be aware of the gap between donor motivations and their own, and strategize about how to steer the donor and their money toward their own purposes:

We have projects [where] the donors give the money to stop migration to Europe or to find a solution to youth unemployment, so they do not revolt maybe (laughs). ... They give us this money; we use it to, yes, establish some tools that can be used in [other places, other

ways]. So that's what we do: establish something that can inspire, energize the thinking of, for instance, women in the informal economy. And how do you go about doing it? We use that one money to do a multiplier effect: money from one place to go a longer way. We use it to generate alliances.

Again, in this set of manoeuvres, there were multiple parties engaging with one another. This expert had to engage with the donor and their objectives. She also asserted that they used the money they received to run projects that could be also helpful elsewhere and build networks with potential allies. All of these were processes that, sometimes, left people frustrated and, occasionally, gave them small victories. Anne Marie Goetz, after leaving her position at UN Women, gave an interview, aptly titled "Too Much That Can't Be Said", in which she talked about the problems of funding for gender equality inside institutions of governance, which arguments gain traction, what gets lost in the process and the limits to what one can say while working in international governance (Hudson and Goetz, 2014). These limits are not the same in every organization and vary even from department to department. Many interviewees talked about the need to keep the conversation focused on equality and rights even though discourses of smart economics became more prevalent. Some talked about witnessing the problematic translations of equality into equity. Others expressed a desire to change conceptualization of economic indicators but being recognized as experts necessitated fluency in neoclassical economics. Many also talked about the tensions between different conceptualizations of cultural sensitivity and gender equality. When people told me of the traction of instrumentalist arguments, they were, in a sense, referring to these complex, situation-bound limits.

One interviewee who had worked in UN Women as well as other institutions of the UN system described the internal contradictions in the following manner:

Many of us are very critical of some of the elements of this. For example, this He-for-She campaign, it really leaves a lot to be desired, but you kind of have to live and let live, I think. In a way, the senior leadership seems to want to have research reports like *Progress of the World's Women* reports ... There's the publicity stuff that you referred to and there are the programmes that go on also. These are the drivers through which a lot of funding is brought into the organization, but they are

not necessarily always aligned with the research positioning of the reports ... But I think this kind of schizophrenia you would probably find in most organizations.

One interviewee, again with experience in UN Women, told me people opposed to some of these campaigns would sometimes try to influence their wording or at least nuance them, but that it usually did not work.

However, there were other small victories from instrumentalizing departmental differences. One brought up for me her copy of the latest report, which adopts a rights-perspective, criticizes the Bretton Woods institutions for their approaches to problems of development, and highlights new ways of defining economy, production and productivity (Heintz et al., 2015; Razavi and Turquet, 2016). It was full of earmarked pages and colourful post-its. She told me of an incident when she had said something in a room full of executives and somebody remarked that her framing sounded too radical. She had responded, “No, we said it in the *Progress Report* last year” and she was able to get the language she wanted from an institutional policy document. Here again there was an engagement where the writers of the report were not in the room, yet one gender expert could use it to engage with the executives who were. Others told similar stories of how they could use UN-SWAP to push for internal institutional change with executives who were not necessarily feminists but would be very embarrassed to be left behind other institutions. Some gender experts openly acknowledged that they used the leverage of supportive directors to establish positions of authority for themselves in otherwise very specialized, technicalized UN agencies.

These stories relate processes of instrumentalization of the very institutions, departments and actors that are also actively involved in producing regimes that limit feminist agendas. They are stories of producing ambiguity for specific audiences to get things done while appearing to do other things. Spatially, they are open and not everyone is in the same setting. They are open ended because they are continuous and can have different outcomes depending on which alliances are built along the way. They are ambiguous because these tactics still depend on institutional power arrangements, both inside and outside. While this ambiguity has political potential, it is also a marker of the limits to what can be achieved.

## **Conclusion**

In one interview I conducted with a gender expert who had worked for a long time as a researcher before joining a policy institute, she told me how “murky” both her everyday work and the world of politics in general can be. She went on to tell me the story of a politician who defined herself as a feminist, yet simultaneously – as witnessed by the interviewee – portrayed herself as a modest wife and good mother to win votes. The interviewee told me that she sometimes felt lost in this state of ambiguity. In the paper, I have argued that there is therefore a need to pay attention to what is and can be present in these instances of ambiguity.

Drawing on a growing literature that argues for the need to study those spaces, acts and actors that are not easily captured by descriptions of co-optation versus ideologically pure advocacy, I have suggested framing these actors’ strategies and the meanings they attribute to them as politics of engagement. I started with the argument that a neutral framing such as this allows us to question the idea that the inside and outside of international governance are clearly demarcated spaces and positions. Instead, we should pay attention to narratives of the actual, lived complexity at the level of micro-politics. This allows us to better unpack the inequalities governing these institutional spaces and to produce a depiction that does not disparage or idealise what is being done in the name of gender expertise or advocacy.

The work of gender expertise and gender experts is not immune to inequalities within or between institutions of governance in the international system. Thus, the politics of engagement unfolds in distinct ways within these contextual limitations; it entails micro-political encounters with different institutional positions, hegemonic narratives and non-feminist others. I have depicted three types of politics of engagement around the trope of instrumentalization. First, I have argued that tracing gender experts’ circulations between multiple positions and institutions leads to a recognition of the blurred boundaries between the inside and the outside. These multiple positions, I suggested, can be instrumental within experts’ current institutional settings as they build networks and use them on the inside. While these practices can reproduce institutional mandates, they can also shift them over time. Second, I proposed that instrumentalist and ambiguous deployments of gender-related development goals are the outcome of engagements with actors that the interviewees identify as non-feminist others and describe in terms of their own institutionally unequal positions. These are institutional settings where gender is often, at best, secondary to other mandates. These engagements often produce the outcomes for which development institutions are criticized: instrumentalist depictions of gender. Gender experts, often

aware that they might be risking being instrumentalized themselves, nevertheless continue to utilize such strategies in the perceived absence of alternatives. Finally, the same power inequalities can also be turned on their head in other engagements. That is, instrumentalization can be a strategy whereby gender experts push their own agendas by using the inequalities between institutions and departments that they do not necessarily work in. These open-ended interactions produce precarious possibilities to shift existing inequalities. Overall, the strategic choices emerging in these micropolitical encounters are the outcome of the unequal opportunity structures and constraints that individuals perceive.

This study has attempted to draw attention to deliberate ambivalences and instrumentalizations in policy speak and the porous boundaries of hegemonic institutions from the vantage point of gender expertise. I have tried to show the actual diversity of both engaging actors and acts of engagements. Paying attention to power inequalities and positional differences, I aimed to comprehend what gender experts' micropolitical strategies, and the meanings they attribute to these strategies, can (or cannot) achieve. The stuff of gender expertise is very much politicized and contested at multiple levels, ranging from the microcosms of the institutions themselves through the nation-states that experts need to work with to the general structure of international governance within which development priorities are shaped. Studying these workplace narratives reveals the political possibilities and limitations, which often unfold simultaneously and change course in myriad ways, and allows us to understand the complex layers of international governance.

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