Methodology

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Conceptual framework

The starting point of the research was that gender equality is a dynamic, contested concept that takes on different meanings in different spatiotemporal contexts. The concept travels through space and time, crossing national as well as institutional borders. In this process, its meaning is stretched, shrunk and bent (Lombardo et al. 2009): "gender equality can be filled with a variety of meanings that arise from different political histories, contexts, struggles, and debates. That is, gender equality is a concept open to interpretation and contestation by different actors." The study of such a concept and such processes of interpretation and contestation necessitate a discursive approach to politics and policy.

The research was built around the concept of policy frames: an "organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included" (Verloo 2005: 20). During the course of the research we differentiated between issue frames (a relatively coherent reasoning in which issue specific prognostic elements respond to issue-specific diagnostic elements), document frames (the particular ways in which a document or an actor constructs the issue at hand by using one or more issue frames), and metaframes (which stretch over different policy issues and which are the generalised normative aspects of issue frames).

The research thus endeavoured to analyse policy frames in gender+ equality policies by (1) collecting relevant documents, (2) identifying issue frames contained in them, (3) comparing different countries, actors and issues based on how the documents use these issue frames.

Methodology step-by-step

 - Issue histories: Timelines of policy developments between 1995 and 2007 were compiled for all the issues. The timelines contained all actors participating in the debates and all the major documents produced by these actors.

 - Sampling documents: The most relevant documents were selected for closer analysis in each country. Four types of documents (law, policy plan, parliamentary debate, civil society text) were chosen for each of the 12 sub-issues. If several documents were available, the most recent and most significant documents were chosen.

 - Coding: Documents chosen were entered into a database and coded with the help of detailed qualitative coding. Syntactic coding was used to allow for flexibility and comparability.

 - Code standardization: Codes entered to the database were organised in a hierarchical code-tree to allow analysis at different levels of generality.

 - Frame building: Issue frames were identified by finding regularly co-occurring sets of codes. Frames identified were mapped to documents to allow comparison between countries, issues and actors.

 - Contextual data: Background information on the legal, political and socio-economic situation in each country was collected in a systematic manner to put the data gathered in context and offer possible explanations for differences and similarities identified between countries.