

POLITICS AND RESEARCH - TWO PARTS OF A VELVET TRIANGLE ?

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**PRESENTATION AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS
ROME OCTOBER 25-26 2007**

50 years ago the 'Treaty of Rome' was signed in this very city which meant the actual starting up of what has now become the European Union.

And this European Union has declared 2007 as the "European Year for Equal Opportunities for All". Policymakers of all countries have been requested to organise activities that enable the EU acquis in the field of Equal Opportunities and Anti-discrimination, to be disseminated to a public as broad as possible. One of the findings is namely that not enough people are aware of their rights (the 4 R's : Rights, Representation, Recognition, and Respect). This means that with the activities organised during this year we strive for the spreading of more knowledge on these four important matters. (the knowledge about the Rights, a fair Representation in society, a Recognition of the values and Respect and Tolerance for all). In this presentation we will look at the 'Velvet Triangle' in Flemish Equal Opportunities Policies, the role of the actors and two specific cases.

I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to share ideas about Gender and Human Rights and it is an honour for me to be standing here in Rome fifty years later. I will present to you what we are doing in Flanders as an input in the discussion, and for your information I would like to stress that I am speaking as a policymaker and not as a researcher, so this might give a slightly different perspective in sharing ideas.

The Velvet Triangle

Flanders lies in the Northern part of Belgium. This region has its own regional government, parliament and ministry with autonomous power for several policydomains (like culture, education welfare, mobility..) So within these competencies we work on Equal Opportunities in a transversal and in a specific way.

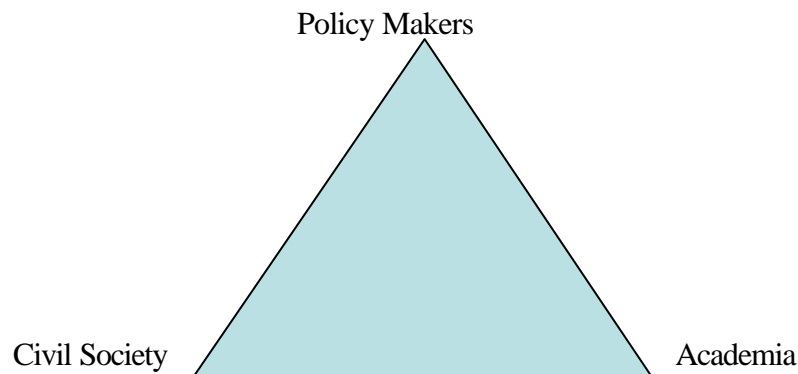
Democracy is participation

In Europe we are all living in democratic countries - and democracy is all about the participation of people in shaping the policymaking that is to reign their lives.

The concept of the 'Velvet Triangle' is a way of organising participation of civil society into the policymaking for Equal Opportunities (in this case). Actually we did not start with creating the Velvet Triangle for the policymaking - it was rather the other way around : we started working on Equal Opportunities Policies in 1996 and the way we organised this was later called the 'Velvet Triangle' by one of our professors Alison Woodward¹ from the Free Brussels University.

¹ Woodward, Alison 'Building Velvet Triangles: Gender and Informal Governance' in Informal Governance and the European Union edited by Simona Piattoni and Thomas Christiansen, London: Edward Elgar (2004) 76-93

In the process of policymaking for Equal Opportunities 3 types of actors are distinguished :



In the daily practice of policymaking these three actors work together : policymakers, civil society (NGO's) and researchers (or people from Academia). Within this triangle, the dialogue must take place;

So, who are these actors ?

1. Policymakers :

Within the group of policymakers different actors can still be perceived :

- the politicians in charge who take the decisions, like the ministers but also governors and mayors at provincial or local level
- the civil servants that “prepare” the decisions for politicians;
- the politicians that are active in formal structures like parliament or in provincial or local councils;

Out of these groups we focus on the civil servants who have a facilitating job in the policymaking and who spend a lot of time and energy in executing the decisions taken.

For the other actors in the velvet triangle (the ngo's and the academia) it is important to know that these different subactors exist and that within the group of policymakers the goals and ambitions can differ. So, although they are all policymakers, the group of policymakers is not homogeneous and they are not always speaking with 'one voice'. And more important even experience shows us that not all of the individuals in this group are feminists (femocrats) in the case of gender equality as a policy.

When NGO's or Academia approach policymakers they must bear in mind the different roles that are played at this level

2. Academia – researchers and teachers :

In the context of this conference the group of Academia is most clear, who you are, what it is and what it stands for, but one can still wonder whether this group is homogeneous too – and even when we only talk about women's or gender studies, we know that in this field people

work from different angles and disciplines, and within each discipline each researcher has its own expertise as was clearly marked with the different presentations yesterday on one theme. So, also here we can conclude that the group is not homogeneous to work with.

In Flanders we have 5 universities that look at gender from different angles : literature, sociology, economy, politicology, pedagogy, philosophy,...

Contacts with researchers are organised by our service on a regular level. There is :

- research organised on ad hoc themes with open contests; which means that universities apply for grants for projects that the government organises; All projects are being followed up by a steering committee that discusses the set up and outcome of the research projects;
- the creation of a Flemish Policy Research Centre for Equal Opportunities in 2001 (see further case 1)

3. Civil society :

With civil society is meant : the organisations and movements of the different target groups (gathered here in the term of NGO's) and within this context we will only talk about the women's movement. In practice however many organisations exist. Some of them exist since a long time and some are new, and they all have diverse aims and actions and are working from different philosophical and political ideas. So also this group is not homogeneous as a partner in a dialogue. Starting up a dialogue with NGO's means making a choice of partners and this is not always an easy or evident task; usually they all have their own field of expertise that can make the choice easier (for a dialogue about "women and violence" e.g. it might be more interesting to confer directly with the grassroot organisations that are specialising in this field than with the National Women's Council – it always depends on the goal of the dialogue at that moment).

Structurally in Flanders we have two kinds of actions towards the NGO's :

- financial support is offered via structural funds or grants for projects that are set up by the organisations and that fit within the priorities of policymaking at that moment.
- creating a dialogue on the basis of " themes" via e.g. participation in awarenessraising or other actions that are set up by the government (like campaigns).

The dialogue with NGO's still has other characteristics : The dialogue can be bilateral or multilateral, and it can be informal or formal, but it would lead us too far to go into those details for now.

The job of the civil servant in these contacts is to facilitate the dialogue. The civil servant is, so to speak, in the middle between levels – she listens to comments and ideas and 'translates' these into policyproposals for the minister, but on the other hand decisions taken have to be 'translated' into implementation. It is like being in the middle of an 8 (an 8) : the process flows between the different actors and levels.

The dialogue is a process

In order to achieve results in the cultural changes – that we need for changing attitudes - it is necessary to try to "unite" and get together these 3 kinds of actors for the policy preparation. This whole dialogue is rather a very difficult but dynamic and ever changing process than a

specific static action. It is a goal and a tool at the same time. It is also necessary because in the past 30 years many actors have become professionals in emancipation. The ties between feminists and academics or policymakers in emancipation have loosened as all have developed into professional domains : we see it as our task to bring them together again.

In order to achieve results in the process some prerequisites must be fulfilled :

- The actors all must have a “right to live”,: they should feel secure that their existence as an organisation, a researcher or as a civil servant is not in peril and that they can put their energy in woman’s matters and not in fundraising or in defending their positions as an alibi for institutional mechanisms.
- There must be mutual trust and respect; working with people has its own flaws!! Sometimes there seems to be a lot of ‘contest’ between women’s organisations or among researchers which is rather stunning, and it keeps us away from defining common goals.
- Everybody must be interested in - or at least be willing to listen to - and know something about each others “world”; the service is at the same time a go between and a commissioner for activities.
- Need for change : it is very important that and it is easier to work with if there is a common goal that brings all the actors in the Velvet Triangle together. So the government can define strategic goals to rally the actors, (which does not mean that we have to invent the goals) because it can also adopt goals that are defined by civil society or rise from research.

Obstacles in the dialogue :

In the follow-up of the process we can meditate about certain obstacles that trouble the dialogue. It is quite a job finding the right balance between formal and informal activities : Formal tends to make processes static in the end; informal always has a risk of one-sidedness in the end when it continues for many years. You have to make sure as a civil servant to open yourself up to new ideas and concepts always.

The same accounts for finding the right balance between steering and listening. The facilitator has an agogical job. In spite of what the partners might think the government is mostly worried about the “right to be critical” – in fact it is very important that civil society and academia remain critical about the policy. But there are many ways for criticism and all of the actors have to evolve towards constructive criticism which is necessary in a democracy. As Mieke Verloo² said during the meeting of the Informal Network on Mainstreaming of the Council of Europe in September 2007, “it is necessary to create ‘safe spaces’ in which we can discuss issues openly”.

There has been an evolution from volunteers to professionals in civil society in the past 30 years, which results in changed methodologies & different approaches; everything has become more ‘serious’ and sometimes the seriousness can stand in the way for effectiveness. This evolution also influences the dialogue : is kicking the government still a good strategy ? can there be something like constructive kicking ?

There is a lot of misunderstanding about the different roles the different actors have to play. Everybody wants to take decisions, while this is a role for decisionmakers solely. Ngo’s tend to want to be in the place of the government. They are impatient and I am sure this is

² Prof. At Radboud university in Nijmegen (Netherlands) and coördinator of the EU research project ‘Quing’

sometimes rightly so. But it is not their role. They can be critical of the policy because only critical assessment of what is being done can help emancipation forward. But one of the roles that Ngo's can play nowadays seems to me to keep women's issues on the political agenda, to do the lobbying and rallying civilians for the themes (goals), and researchers can provide us with data and information that is needed to prove the cause is still worthwhile.

I am simplifying the roles in order to make them more clear in the analysis, but I realise that in general the overflow between roles is not so clear and so easy to make.

Working with the Velvet Triangle

Concluding : it is the task of civil servants to be the facilitator for the debate and preparing for the decisionmaking, but also to create the channels for the different actors to be able to play their roles fully. Through organising the dialogue new themes can easily be put on the agenda, and information is exchanged between the different actors.

The strategy of the Velvet Triangle is still not "a ready recipe" It is with trial and error in the process that we can refine the actions. And it is a long term investment both financially as in energy, because it is a difficult process. But it is working in a network actually and this network is supportive, energising and reliable for actions with a good geographical spread in Flanders.

The process has its weaknesses also and therefore a few prerequisites have to be filled in : it depends a lot on

- the goodwill of all of the actors to get results;
- the skill of the civil servant as facilitator
- the political will to continue financial support for the actors involved – and this is a delicate balance for actors who are needed to be very critical of the policy;

In general civil servants are more tended towards longterm actions than deciding politicians. A survey of the different strategies and their results show that longterm investment produces more positive results than short term actions. Longterm investment does not always imply the biggest budgets but it takes energy and time.

A big social basis is necessary : the bigger the basis is for a goal to reach, the more people are involved or participating in the process the more chances you have to reach the goals set. Political will is mostly emotional and not rational : so even when you develop statistics or data to measure the discrimination of women in our society, it is my experience that decisionmakers are seldom converted by statistics alone (if it would be a rational process they would be converted by the data). People need to believe in a cause and they have to be convinced to adopt the goal. They have to believe in the goal which means they have to be 'touched' in their hearts by the concept.

The political rethorics have quite an impact on the in/output of actors. When the attention of the decisionmakers shifts to minority groups – or diversity as a story – women's organisations tend to follow along in order to remain in the focus of political attention; is this healthy for women's emancipation ? We have to be alert that gender is not 'dropped' into diversity matters. Diversity is OK as long as gender is still taken into account with minorities like migrant women or lesbians or older or handicapped women. Also, this is one of the purposes of the European Year "Equal Opportunities for All" to focus on multiple discriminations and gender should always be taken into account, but it is an art to find the right balance.

Results of working with the Velvet Triangle can be shown with several good practices.

For this conference I choose 2 cases where the accent is more on the side of the academia

CASE 1 : Policy Research Centre for Equal Opportunities

Equal Opportunities in Flanders created a Policy Research Centre in 2001. It was part of a global government decision to create policy research centres at universities in different policy domains, but we were very proud that Equal Opportunities was one of the accepted topics. It had a 5 year contract that was renewed in 2007 for another 5 years. The contract includes fundamental research as well as research aimed at policy support. The Centre researches more target groups than only gender and it has specific tasks like gathering (gender) statistics, developing indicators for measuring progress and making a yearbook on equal opportunities.

The Policy Research Centre works together with the service and with the cabinet of the minister as well as with the different experts in the fields of the target groups. They organise seminars that are attended by all actors.

As an example of activities we can mention the organisation of an International Conference for Gays and Lesbians in September 2007, that our minister funded in the framework of the European Year Equal Opportunities for All. Both the policy centre as organisations of the movement were very active in the steering committee for this conference. Actually the whole content of the conference was mostly filled in by the researchers of the policy centre.

Results after the first 5 years :

We see an increase in the :

- development of professionalism and expertise
- the number of gender specialists
- multiplication of femocrats in official jobs (cities, provinces, ministries)
- profound analysis of gender problems, little by little more analysis is being made.
- statistics to show the discrimination of women, but this process and the development of indicators goes very slowly.

One of the side-effects of all those activities is that with the joint efforts there is more attention for gender issues in the media.

CASE 2 : the Athena network

Athena is an acronym for "Advanced Thematic Network in European Women's Studies". It was created in 1996 by AOIFE (*The Association of Institutions for Feminist Education and Research in Europe*) and selected by the European Union as a Socrates Thematic Project in 1998. It has been selected for 3 years projects ever since so in 2006 a new project started (Athena3), with different working groups following different themes.

The central Coordination of the Athena network lies at the Utrecht University in the Netherlands. <http://www.athena3.org>

Within the network I am one of the coordinators of one of the subprojects 'The Societal Impact of Women's Studies' called the project 3A. (And two of the other speakers at this conference are members of our working group). This working group forms a Think tank : we network and organise discussions and seminars; There are more than 30 participants from 19 European countries that take part in the working group 3A. The last seminar we organised was held during the last annual Athena meeting in Budapest in June 2007. Our working group can

be called exemplary for the Velvet Triangle on a European level as there are (mostly) researchers taking part in it, but also representatives of the women's movement and a few other policy makers. During the annual Athena meeting and some of our seminars, we organise workinggroup meetings to exchange ideas through discussing presentations about ongoing research of the participants. The project has a website and an Expert Database. All participants in this conference are invited to fill in their data in the database

(<http://www.rosadoc.be/athena>)

The proceedings of the seminar in Budapest on the theme of the European Year "Equal Opportunities for All" will be published in the next Athena volume, enlarged with contributions from different countries (assessments from a gender perspective of the activities that have been organised in countries for the European Year Equal Opportunities for All in 2007).