



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

**Gender Impact
Assessment**
Austria, 03-04 June 2014

Comments Paper –
The Netherlands

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This publication is supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013).

This programme is implemented by the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment, social affairs and equal opportunities area, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Europe 2020 Strategy goals in these fields.

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Gender Impact Assessment in the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

1.1. What is a gender impact assessment?

A gender impact assessment can be defined as a tool or a method to analyse the potential effects of new government policies on gender equality before decisions are taken (Beijing Platform for Action 1995). This implies that there should be a process of arriving at the assessment and evaluation of these effects, and what shall be done with them. This can be done in many different ways. As there is a strong variation of what is seen as gender equality, even in the context of Europe (Verloo 2007), an explicit or implicit vision of what is seen to be gender equality is part of it. A gender impact assessment can thus have many different formats and contents.

1.2. Generic and specific format gender impact assessments

One of the main differences in format is whether the format for a gender impact assessment is fixed or not. If fixed, then the format constructs the steps to be followed and the procedure to assess effects and apply criteria. If not fixed, the execution of the generic gender impact assessment is left to the persons doing the gender impact assessment. In this report, capital letters will be used to refer to the Dutch or other fixed format Gender Impact Assessment, and undercast for the method as such or for non-fixed formats.

2. Policy debates and gender impact assessments in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a rather constant high score in measures of gender equality (Gender Equality Index 2013 nr 4; Gender Inequality Index 2011 nr 2, 2014 nr 1), even with its very high percentage of women that are working part time and are not economically independent (that means, do not earn 70% of the minimum wage). Its high score is strongly influenced by the relatively high number of women in politics.

With decades old emancipation policies (starting from 1975), the Netherlands has adopted gender mainstreaming under another label since the beginning, resulting in the construction and adoption of a gender impact assessment methodology in 1994 (Lauwers 2007; Verloo and Roggeband 1997). Yet, the Dutch Emancipation Review Committee also concluded in 2007 that gender mainstreaming is hardly implemented (Visitatie Commissie Emancipatie. 2007a and 2007b). In the period 1994-2005, 22 Gender Impact Assessments were undertaken (Roggeband and Verloo 2006). This is a small number given the hundreds of policies made every year.

Since 2007 however, there has not been any official Gender Impact Assessment anymore. The reasons for this are probably manifold, although the changed political opportunities most probably have been very important. In the course of the 2000s, there have been a series of government with very little support for gender equality, and the administrative unit (which is still small, and has been virtually leaderless for a long time until quite recently) has been transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences. In this transfer the unit lost the C in its name (this stood for Coordination), meaning that it became even less strong vis-à-vis other departments.

The Dutch Gender Impact Assessments had a clearly outlined methodology that consisted of positions taken on what are the main structures that constitute gender inequality (division of labour and organisation of intimacy), what are the main mechanisms sustaining it (material as well as discursive), and what are the main criteria for evaluating the potential effects found (equality, pluriformity and autonomy). In its procedures, it was modelled after the Environmental Impact Assessment, consisting of several steps, including the offering of alternatives.

The Dutch Gender Impact Assessments have been evaluated twice and there has been an academic analysis of their success and failures that was done in 2006 (Roggeband and Verloo 2006). The random and relative success of the instrument is analysed by Roggeband and Verloo to be the negative result of: an inherent tension in the strategy of gender mainstreaming because of its assumptions of structures creating biases while agents working in these structures are supposed to counteract the biases; the low ground floor commitment for gender mainstreaming and gender impact assessment under conditions of very high decision making power of civil servants compared to politicians in the Netherlands; the strong process character of policymaking where endless series of draft texts are produced; the low political commitment to gender equality; the almost absent mobilising networks, and the high degree of civil servant turnover that impacts on policy learning. On the positive side stand mainly the efforts of a few policy entrepreneurs in different government locations that made good use of the ever-changing political opportunities.

At this moment it remains unclear how many generic types of gender impact assessments might have been executed under other names. A brief search revealed that generic gender impact assessments might have been executed under the label of gender scan, budget scan or fast check. There has been a gender scan on the B9 regulation in 2011 (E-quality et al. 2011). The B9 regulation is about procedures for victims of human trafficking). A second gender scan is announced on policies on domestic violence, executed by a private company upon assignment by the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Sciences that is currently responsible for gender and LGBT equality. There is some evidence on the web of a number of 'fast check's (sneltoets) executed for a small number of local and national administrations, but those have been part of a non-public process of advisory processes. Lastly, there is evidence of a budget scan for 2014, where Atria (a non-profit organisation partly subsidised by the Dutch government) analyses what the effect of the budget of 2014 will be on economic independence of women in the Netherlands.

3. Transferability issues

3.1. Good practices in Austria and Finland

The Discussion Papers on Austria and Finland give information about good practices on gender impact assessments in these countries.

For Austria Schratzenstaller describes how Austria obliges all governmental levels to aim at 'effective gender equality' in budgeting since 2009, embedded in its performance budgeting, and how the Federal Budget Act of 2013 organises gender impact assessment as part of regulatory impact assessment.

Gender impact assessment is seen to provide the 'information necessary to assess whether the measure in question can contribute to reaching defined gender equality objectives'. The defined gender equality objectives are not mentioned precisely in the discussion paper.

While these developments are obviously very recent, the first results of these new requirements show that only a small proportion of regulatory assessments contained a gender impact assessment (3 out of 59), while a further 5 would have fallen within the criteria to make one. The gender budgeting seemed to have included 28 gender equality objectives (out of 123), covering issues of the division of work and care, decision-making and education.

For Finland, Elomäki describes a different good practice, where gender impact assessments are meant to prevent direct or indirect negative effects on gender rather than ensuring that all legislation and policies strengthen gender equality. In Finland there is no legal obligation for gender impact assessment. The broad gender mainstreaming obligation for government officials is the legal base.

The theory and methodology have been developed in the early 2000s, and they still apply, although the instructions that are part of the 2007 general impact assessment guidelines are shorter and less demanding. There is some training. The guidelines are made to be not too time consuming, and concentrate on the idea of different needs and situations of women and men. The range of spheres of life that is seen as relevant for gender impact assessments is large (11). The guidelines are also non-binding, but there is a unit charged with monitoring (quantitatively) what is done.

For Finland there is evidence of a growing frequency of gender impact assessments, but there is no study on their content, or on their impact. There are a few examples of successful gender impact assessments.

3.3. Differences between the Netherlands, Austria and Finland

Austria, Finland and the Netherlands are very different countries, and in their specific configuration on gender in politics they also vary over time (whether governments are supported by right wing parties, whether there are ministers responsible for gender equality, etc.).

It is not easy to compare gender impact assessment in the three countries.

Compared to the Netherlands in the 1995-2005 period, Finland resembles the Netherlands most in that it has non-binding arrangements, and an explicit methodology, even if this methodology is based on a narrower understanding of gender equality as gender difference. This narrower methodology seems to allow for some success but without a more extensive analysis of all or a significant sample of gender impact assessments it is not possible to decide if overall the choice for a narrower methodology is acceptable.

For Austria, it is harder to compare the content of what is done as gender impact assessment for lack of information on its understanding of gender equality and its exact procedure. That there is a firm legal base seems a huge advantage if indeed the content goes beyond simple gender difference assessments. There seems to be a need to further action given that there are some oversights in where a gender impact assessment is seen to be needed. The overall setting is very much based on performance monitoring, meaning that priority could be given to the measurable and to what is achievable within short time frames.

The main issues of transferability for any of these good practices to the Netherlands are that there seems to be very little support in the Netherlands at this point in time for engaging again with gender impact assessment. The loss of the Coordination mandate for the equality unit also severely undermines any engagement in supporting other departments in any gender mainstreaming tool. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the only one with visible activity on gender mainstreaming.

3.4. Lessons to be learned and constraints

- Absence of strong mobilisation was a strong factor in the Netherlands in explaining why so little was done (and maybe also why it all stopped). In the light of this, it is striking that there is no good practice that involves consultation of civil society.
- Classic prerequisites such as political commitment and adequate resources should never be underestimated.
- More precise analyses of the good practices could show whether Austria and Finland 'solved' the problem of how to assess the impact 'before decisions are taken': how to organise policy making processes so that there is a clear moment when a draft is assessment ready.
- It seems very difficult to go beyond 'inclusion' or gender difference as a gender equality goal. Yet theory predicts that this will not abolish gender inequality.
- Training on gender can potentially be a strong complementary tool.
- Gender impact assessment should always be public and accessible by decision makers and citizens (this goes against the Dutch fast check).

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