From gender equality to ‘equality of all’
Viewpoints from actors and subjects of equality work

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Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XI. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2010
Ritrýnd grein
Reykjavík: Félagsvísindafnun Háskóla Íslands
ISBN 978-9935-424-00-6
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The expansion of equality work, from a strict focus on gender equality to broader notions of ‘diversity’, ‘anti-discrimination’ or ‘human rights’ has created tensions and mixed feelings. This paper explores the pros and cons of such transformations, as well as ideas, practical or hypothetical, on how to proceed. The theoretical groundwork are feminist theories of intersectionality which explore how various social categories like race, ethnicity, nationality, class, disability, gender, age, sexuality, and correlated systems of oppression, intersect and in the words of Lykke (2005)1 “intra-act” and mutually construct one another (Crenshaw, 1989, 1995; Verloo, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006, Þorgerður Þorvaldsdóttir, 2007). Moreover, Crenshaw’s (1995) notion of ‘political intersectionality’, which refers to the issue of conflicting and contradictory goals in equality work and Hancock’s (2007) threefold typology of a ‘unitary approach’, a ‘multiple approach’ and an ‘intersectional approach’ for studies of inequalities and how they are dealt with at the policy level turned out to be central for my analysis.

In what follows some of the main arguments both for and against expansion as they were expressed in my data will be outlined. The first statement, “gender equality will be set aside” sums up the concern of many that if equality work is to be expanded, gender equality issues will be put on the back burner. This line of argument was contradicted by practical examples which revealed that an expanded equality policy had actually triggered new empathy and concerns. Related is the next line of reasoning, ‘the percentage argument’, which is founded on the firm belief of many that women are not a minority group, and ‘size matters’. The third section explores whether a focus on anti-discrimination signals a move from pro-active to re-active measures. To conclude I will try to visualize what the future holds for equality work by learning from past and present examples from home and abroad.

1 Lykke (2005) draws upon the feminist physicist and philosopher Karen Barad (2003:815) when she emphasizes the importance of looking at how different sociocultural categories, ‘intra-act’, as opposed to ‘inter-act’, in order to see how social intertwining shapes the lives of individuals and groups.
Research data and methods

The paper draws upon three sources of research data. The groundwork are official equal opportunity documents, or ‘authoritative texts’ (Ferree, 2009), i.e. equality; acts, policies, plans, brochures, web-sides, speeches and reports, which both shape and portray the equality landscape under study. The second source of data is academic work, mostly writings of feminist scholars in the field of gender and equality studies. Those texts helped to initiate new questions and either confirm or contradict my own findings. More importantly they served as a window to the wider world, but the Icelandic discussions about expansion are just a fraction of a larger Western discourse that is not constrained by geographical boundaries.

The third set of data are 27 open interviews with three overlapping groups of people that map out the knowledge and concerns of both ‘agents’ and ‘subjects’ of equally work. The groups are: “Equality workers”, members of feminist movements, and spokespersons for various minority groups, i.e. immigrants, people with disability, LGBT people, and the elderly. The first group which I have labeled ‘equality workers’, needs further clarification. I chose that label because it enabled me to include, without making any distinction, those who work on gender equality and equality for all, also phrased as diversity, anti-discrimination or human rights work. Some of them worked full time or part time, on promoting gender equality and/or human rights, for the state run Centre for Gender Equality, for the large municipalities or for social movements. Others acted as paid or unpaid delegates in various equality committees; within public or private institutes and companies, as representatives of political parties at the municipalities, or as equality commissioners within the ministries. This turned out to be the largest group of interviewees.

Since the Icelandic equality domain is a small world I have chosen complete anonymity rather than pseudonym when I refer to my interviewees. What I do state however, is their social position at the time and the year of the interview. The time factor is important because my interviews were conducted over a period of six years (2004-2010) during which the equality landscape at home and abroad has undergone some drastic changes. So, while all of my interviewees responded to semi fixed questions about the expansion of equality work they had different premises. Those who were interviewed early on were merely responding to the idea of expansion, which was still at a hypothetical level as it had not yet been implemented in Iceland while those who were interviewed later on had the advantage of remarking on policies that already existed and they had experienced, either first hand as equality workers or as subjects of equality work.

“Gender equality will be set aside”

If we yield our equality matters of men and women into a larger machinery, then it only means, based on our long experience; less money, less attention, less resources, less end result.

(A women’s movement representative, 2007)

One of the most commonly expressed concerns in the expansion discourse, is that there is still too much left to do in terms of gender equality together with the fear that if equality work will be expanded gender equality, more precisely women’s issues, will be set aside, as something already over and done with. These concerns, which are far from being uniquely Icelandic (see Freidenvall, 2009; Woodward, 2008) were coupled with “the fear that the recognition of multiple inequalities will generate a ‘hierarchy of oppression’ in which different groups will fight over scarce recourses and institutional
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access” (Squires, 2007, pp. 160). These beliefs, grounded in practical concerns, highlight an emerging “political competition” (Verloo, 2006) or hierarchization of inequalities, vividly phrased by Martinez as ‘Oppression Olympics’ (Ferree, 2009, p. 86, as cited in Martinez, 1993).

Many of the equality workers and women’s movements representatives that were interviewed from 2004-2010 firmly opted for a ‘unitary approach’ with gender as a primary category. They feared that if already limited funding and human resources devoted to equality work were to be split up among various minority strands, little progress would be made at any level. Moreover some maintained that the different inequality structures were so differently situated in terms of legal, political and social standing that to combine them all under one policy or institution alongside gender equality would do more harm than good for all.

These arguments clashed with the view that all inequality structures “are in fact rather similar” which was expressed by a few of my interviewees. Hence, a spokesperson for a minority group, interviewed in 2007, was very pleased with the changes that had occurred in Reykjavik and stressed the resemblance rather than the dissimilarity of the different equality claims. “These are naturally the same thoughts, regarding equality of men and women, and then equality of the disabled … of LGBT people, regarding ethnicity and so on.” What here is being emphasized is “the assumed similarity of inequality” (Verloo, 2006, p. 214) but the awareness of specificity and the need to acknowledge “different kinds of differences” (Yuval-Davis, 2006) appears to be missing.

Another line of reasoning which has often been used to legitimize the claim that all equality work should be a single entity’s responsibility is that it would guarantee that all the knowledge and experience acquired during 35 years of official gender equality work could be applied to other inequality strands as well. Some of the interviewees questioned the legitimacy of this argument and claimed that knowledge of gender equality was only transferable to a limited extent. Others feared that the imbalance in terms of existing knowledge and expertise between the different inequality structures would create multi-layered problems. Such concerns were expressed by an equality worker who delivered a comprehensive expert opinion when the equality act was under revision in 2006.

The status of all groups requires special knowledge. There is substantially more knowledge regarding gender equality than there is for minority groups. Hence, the danger is that it is not in the advantage of minority groups to merge with gender equality issues, which build on a long experience, concern everyone, and relate to big social movements, i.e. women’s movements. Homosexuals have for an example complained about the “intrusion” of gender equality in the general equality discourse. Others have worried that gender equality will be set aside and special knowledge in the field will not be applied. Still others have pointed out that totally unrelated issues are being mixed up, even though all have to do with human rights and equality of all citizens in society.

(Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir, 2006, p. 4, my translation)

Similarly, a former equality worker and a women’s movement representative, who was interviewed in 2008, pointed out that while a wealth of knowledge existed in terms of gender equality that was not the case with minority groups, i.e. on issues of ethnicity/race, sexuality, disability and age. Therefore she claimed it was necessary to build up sufficient knowledge within all fields before mixing all together, otherwise the other inequality issues would be set aside as too overwhelming, too many and too complicated. She concluded:

The reason that expansion is not such a good idea now is mainly twofold. First, in terms of gender equality, there is simply too much work still to be done there,
and we need to focus on that. And secondly, in terms of the other minority groups, there we haven’t come far enough, so we should concentrate on gathering and creating new knowledge, and work efficiently within each subject category, and be willing to spend considerably on that in each case.

As an alternative she stated:

It might be beneficial if these different experts would work in more collaboration than they have previously done, in order to learn from one another, but that doesn’t mean that they all have to work under one directive.

What she is proposing is a multiple approach where each equality strand is worked on separately, in order to develop proficiency and knowledge within each field. On that premise there is a ground for some kind of collaboration or teamwork where the different experts would join forces when needed. A women’s movement representative had a similar vision in 2007.

In the ideal circumstances there would be a specific person who would be responsible for the work on gender equality, and then others would deal with the other groups in question. That is, a team of experts, that could work together and would be attentive to the needs of all the groups.

A pre-condition though is to guarantee that each subject field has secure funding and a legal and administrative setting in order to produce knowledge and efficiency. Unfortunately, that is not the case in Iceland today. The legal scholar Oddný Mjöll Arnardóttir (2009) thus pointed out, that when we reach outside the realm of gender equality, the legal protection is both fractured and weak. She insisted that in terms of non-discrimination laws Iceland is lagging far behind European countries it generally compares itself to. As for improvements she claimed that there were two equally valuable options – a comprehensive discrimination act – like the Swedish model (Diskrimineringslag (2008, p. 567), or several special acts that are tailored to serve the particular needs of each minority position in question. According to her, the current situation, however, is simply intolerable.

Women are not a minority group or the ‘percentage’ argument

Women are not a minority group. The equality discourse is not about the special needs of women, but that they should have the same opportunities as men. We should not define equality issues as “women’s problems” and women as one of those ‘trouble groups’.

(A women’s movement representative, 2007)

The statement; ‘women are not a minority group’, became almost like a mantra that was stated over and over again, in my interviews and whenever I engaged in formal or informal conversations about my research topic. Consequently, people would argue that the equality discourse should not be about women’s special needs, as if women were the problem in equality work, but about structural inequalities that women face in society, despite the fact that they constitute half of the population. To underscore these arguments the issue of percentages was oftentimes brought up, or the simple fact that “size matters” in equality work. A women’s movement representative, interviewed in 2007, thus claimed that it mattered; “whether you are taking about half of society, or a group that approximately counts for 10%.”

When a woman who had been active in the women’s movement and/or been an equality worker at various sites for about thirty years, was asked to compare the current emphasis on diversity and the legendary attempts of women’s movements in
the ‘70s and ‘80s to include the needs of all women across lines of class, education or age (both race and sexuality were non-issues in Iceland at the time) she stated:

It is no longer about reaching all women or all men, but about dividing us all up in groups and then say; we need to attend to this group and this group and this group, and then we need to attend to women. As if they are a minority group.
And then men, we can no longer forget men.

Nevertheless, she was conscious of the fact that new emphases on diversity had come about because of drastic societal changes where differences in terms of nationality/ethnicity, sexuality, able-bodiness and religion have finally come to be a part of everyday life in Iceland. As an alternative she highlighted the need to recognize the intra-group differences among women and among men, instead of treating them like homogeneous groups:

We always have to look at things in context. While we are working on gender equality we also have to work on equal status of people of different races, or different social status, or different ability – physically and mentally. … It is important that we don’t mix it together. And that we don’t say … here is gender equality, and then it is equality between native Icelanders and immigrants, and here is equality between disabled and able-bodies, and so on. That is because women and men belong to all of these groups; gender is the common denominator. They are not just one group, but part of them all. I think that is important.

Contrary to fears about gender equality being set aside were harsh accusations which stated that feminists had monopolized the equality concept. A counter argument, which highlighted the principle of social justice over the claim that ‘size mattered’ was made by a spokesman from Samtökín ’78 The National Organization of Lesbians and Gay People in Iceland in 2007. He was highly skeptical about the development in equality work, and the ways in which the notion of equality had been monopolized for gender equality.

Equality is supposed to deal with equality of citizens. … Therefore we can not establish one special court [Complaints Committee on Gender Equality]… then we need to establish another court for people of color, and another for different religions. … I admit that [women] are a much larger group, but we cannot build justice on the impudence of the majority. Justice is not necessarily that the majority rules.

Conflicting nature of equality work

It is crystal clear that this approach is all about attending to different needs; of people of foreign background, of people with disability, it is about paying attention to their special needs, make it possible for them to have the same opportunities as others, and therefore it is of a slightly different nature than traditional gender equality work.

(An equality worker and a women’s movement representative, 2007)

A fundamental issue which was brought up over and over again had to do with the very definition of equality work and what it should entail. At this point it is helpful to recall the three stages that gender equality work has gone through over the past 35 years or so, namely; equal treatment, positive action and gender mainstreaming. An equality worker, who was interviewed in 2004, thus agreed with the principle that equality work should be expanded to include minority groups, but she nevertheless expressed some doubts on how that could be worked out in practice. To make her
point she outlined two conflicting approaches, which from her viewpoint could not be compromised. On one hand she pinpointed the “expansion of the equality concept.” This approach focused on the beneficiaries of equality work, that is, which categories should fall under the rubric of equality work, but it can be summed up with the question “the equality of whom?” The alternative approach, which she had been emphasizing in her own work, can be phrased as “a broader vision of equality” since it referred to the diverse sectors of society that equality work should be affecting, which really is gender mainstreaming in practice. Here the focus was clearly on gender equality so instead of asking “equality of whom?” the question could be reformulated into “how far, deep and wide into various sector of society should equality work reach?” The former approach, commonly triggers re-active measures, while the latter, approach is more likely to prompt pro-active measures in equality work (Freidenvall, 2009). My interviewee doubted that the two approaches could be combined successfully. A similar dilemma concerning whether to focus on the subjects or objects of equality work, and what that would entail, was raised by Squires (2008) in relation to a recent UK transformation from a separate strand approach to a multiple approach with the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 2007 (Squires, 2008, pp. 53). The different nature of gender mainstreaming work and anti-discrimination approaches was also addressed by Woodward (2008), who is a Belgian scholar.

A focus on antidiscrimination does not necessarily attack the structures and values that underlie discriminatory behavior. A policy may be non-discriminatory, but this does not mean it will actively promote gender or any other equality. Gender mainstreaming in that respect is the stronger approach and is based on transforming collective relations rather than individual grievances.

(Woodward, 2008, p. 298)

At the EU level gender advocates like the European Women’s Lobby have expressed concerns that an exclusive anti-discrimination approach is taking EU’s equality work away from a more holistic or structural approach to fighting gender inequality. They worry that;

emphasis on anti-discrimination brings with it the risk of regressing to a mere equal opportunities approach that places the emphasis on the individual, neglects more structural strategies such as positive action and mainstreaming and gives insufficient tools to promote equality.

(Lombardo & Verloo, 2009, p. 489-490)

An Icelandic women’s movement representative, who was interviewed in 2007, also distinguished between traditional gender equality work, which is about societal transformations, and expanded versions which merely aim to “remove the thresholds.”

**Visualizing the future**

The problem of how to do the work should not hinder that it will be done. That is just something that needs to be solved. … First we need to set the goals and then figure out how to reach them.

(A spokesman for a minority group, 2007)

I want to end this discussion on the status of equality work in Iceland with some thoughts on viable solutions for the future, based on local and international experiences. In terms of practical evaluations two equality workers from the city of
Reykjavik, where all equality work has been combined under a single policy and one administrative setting gave unexpected but positive feedback. They stressed the fact that gender equality was still the ruling factor, since the policy emphasized the need to pay attention to how the status of men and women within various minority strands might be different. An intersectional understanding was also presented as it acknowledged the need to recognize that many of the city inhabitants “belong to more than one of the groups it covers” (Reykjavíkurborg, 2006). This understanding was further highlighted in a brochure published in 2009 where the human rights policy was outlined in simple terms with practical examples. There the metaphor of gender equality as a red thread played a central role, both visually and verbally (Reykjavíkurborg, 2009).

The interviewees agreed that as a result of the expansion equality work had somehow been revitalized. The former one, interviewed in 2009, stated: “I believe that in reality you can get a sharper focus on gender equality by expanding the policy this way, because you receive more goodwill when you have taken more subject matters on board.” The latter, interviewed in 2010, also had a positive story to tell:

People find it exciting and can identify with various things that are stated there. For me that is a source of joy. I somehow felt that everyone was getting really tired of gender equality issues. It was as if a metal door was slamming, the moment gender equality was mentioned. But I feel that has changed with this mainstreaming emphasis and by intertwining everything.

In response to questions of whether or not, and then how, the state should follow the initiatives of the municipalities and expand the existing equality act and institutions, my interviewees expressed conflicting views. An equality worker and a feminist activist, who was interviewed in 2007 acknowledged her mixed feelings and the fear of going too far, too fast.

I find it really exciting to put it all together, but I am still scared stiff. And I am frightened of so many things. I believe this is totally the right approach, but I don't know if society and the subject groups are mature enough to do this now.

This shouldn’t turn into some kind of hype, ‘oh, lets all do it’ without really knowing what it is that we are doing. We have authorized the policy, but we have not implemented it yet … I want be sure that we can go back, if this does not work out, if it turns out to be just a trend.

But when is society or the groups in question in fact ready, and how can we tell when that time has come? Should we just patiently wait for that to happen, or is it more efficient to initiate changes, and thereby force society and all the actors involved to simply move forward and adjust to the new system. When responding to the same question an equality worker who was interviewed in 2010, stated more boldly:

If we had all the time in the world, then I would say, let's wait and see how this works out here and now. But then again we never have all the time in the world, so I do think it is right to just have the guts to change things. …

The alternative is to make specific laws about this and that group, but then you are somehow working with many acts and thereby you somehow lose the synchronization of it all. I somehow don’t think that is a wise move either. So yes, I do think that the state government should take the route, but then I am not entirely convinced. … I don’t think there is any one right thing to do.

An in-between alternative, which was in fact proposed by some of my interviewees, was the idea of several separate equality acts, but one administrative setting with a
team of experts that would cooperate and join forces when needed. It corresponds to
the Norwegian model which came into force in 2006 with an Equality and Anti-
discrimination Ombud that enforces four different acts, (LOV 2005-06-10 No. 40). In
Iceland the expansion discourse is awaiting at the threshold in the form of two
European directives. Those are the Race Equality Directive (2000/43/EC) which
implements the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or
ethnic origin and the Employment Framework Directive (2000/78/EC), which
implements the principle of equal treatment in employment and training only,
irrespective of religion or belief, sexual orientation, age, and disability (see Lombardo
and Verloo, 2009, p. 480). A governmental committee that was appointed to decide
how to initiate the directives suggested, along the lines of the Norwegian model, that a
special employee, in charge of those issues should be stationed at the Center for
Gender Equality. Moreover, it proposed that all the inequality grounds listed in the
two directives should enjoy the same level of protection (Félags- og
tryggingamálaráðuneyti, 2008). In September 2010, however, these propositions had
not yet been implemented, and consequently, the two directives were still absent from
the Icelandic legislation.
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