

*Abandon Ship?: The Gendered Wreckage of the  
Economic and Financial Crises in the EU*

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In 2009, Silva Walby asserted that the “neoliberal project” – intensifying in response to the economic and financial crises – is contributing to a “sharply gendered attack” on many of the hard-won achievements of the ‘feminist project.’<sup>1</sup> These crises, we argue, represent a turning point for the European Union (EU). As EU member states struggle to respond via austerity measures and public spending curtailment, some of the defining values of the European states – most notably, gender equality – have been compromised. Looking back, we notice that not only in the wake of the crises, but over the past decades more broadly, gender equality has struggled to steer a smooth and forward course in the EU. In our view, these crises represent a “critical juncture” in which the very being of the EU was construed as ‘in jeopardy.’ While many read this existential threat as fundamentally economic, a majority of feminist scholars would vehemently disagree, seeing gender relations as intrinsic to the workings of the economy – and gender equality as imperative for its healthy functioning. And yet, in the stormy waters of the crisis, consideration for gender relations and more specifically, the goal of gender equality have been treated as a ‘cast off’ in order to insure that EU ‘ship’ stays afloat.

We take a *feminist* historical institutionalist approach to argue that in their handling of the economic and financial crises, EU institutions have missed an opportunity to restructure and ‘reinvent’ themselves in accordance with the formalized and supposedly fundamental commitment to gender equality. While the EU is often portrayed—and indeed, portrays itself – as a leader in the area of gender equality, it was, we contend, far too easily ‘cast off’ in the crises. Consequently, we are left to ponder whether gender equality was really ‘on the ship’ in the first place? Certainly, many feminist scholars would say that gender equality was ‘aboard,’ and they would point to myriad legislation and initiatives as evidence. However, in our read, these measures are generally small, rather piecemeal and not always positive. Notably, they have taken shape primarily when they posed little or no threat to the EU’s neoliberal underpinnings. However, with the survivability of neoliberal project arguably at stake in the crises, the supposed stability of gender equality’s foothold has become suspect. We position the crises and its responses against a historicity of the EU’s gender equality agenda in order to consider what the cumulation of change to-date – both positive and negative - means for the realization of the EU as gender-equitable polity. In so doing, we challenge prevailing notions of “transformative change,” coming from both historical institutionalists and feminists, and cite instances of retrenchment – such as those which occurred with the crises – that have occurred far too readily.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://isa-global-dialogue.net/contested-outcomes-feminism-and-neoliberalism/>.

Our ambitions in this paper are two-fold; first, we aim to show that the EU's responses to the economic and financial crises have resulted in a retrenchment of the EU's gender policies. Not only did the responses to the crises and the resulting changes to the macro-economic system fail to keep gender equality 'aboard,' they actually actively worked against the principle of gender equality that the EU claims to promote. When we conceptualize the crises as a critical juncture which forced the reconfiguration of processes of governance in the economy and the polity, we notice that the crises did not have this same effect of reconfiguring the instruments for gender equality. These observations lead us to our second purpose - to rethink prevailing understandings of incremental change and of critical juncture as espoused by historical institutionalists and feminist institutional scholars. A logical conclusion of these observations is that if gender equality can be so easily 'cast off,' then it is arguably not yet firmly entrenched into the EU's institutional machinery. While gender equality may be 'aboard,' it is not understood as a necessary "navigational tool" for the EU's charting a course.

Following a theoretical discussion in which we consider the position of new institutional and feminist scholars on several fundamental questions, in the second section of the paper, we offer a brief reflection on the gender equality project in the EU. This history elucidates that initiatives which feminist scholars frequently identify as gradual and incremental changes are, in fact not cumulating in a transformative way, and thus calls into question the expectations of feminists and new institutionalists alike, who collectively perceive a gradual move towards gender equality. As we argue in the more empirical portion of the paper, these approaches must be better equipped theoretically to capture not only progressive institutional change but institutional retrenchment. The analysis of the 'six-pack'<sup>2</sup> draws our attention to specific measures that the EU and its member states have called upon in order to check the economic and financial crises and to salvage the neo-liberal economic project, reflected in both the move toward the common currency (Euro) and its common market project. Two points are especially salient: first, that the EU as an institution did not heed the manifold warnings to heed the centrality of gender equality to the economic and fiscal recovery; and second, that the macroeconomic reforms generated through the crises responses have actually served to further entrench neo-liberalism's capitalist, masculine values and retrench gender equality. When we take these observations into account, it becomes clear that despite its proclamations to the contrary, gender equality is not a navigational force behind the EU project.

### ***Troubling the Critical Juncture***

(New) institutionalism has become of late, a composite of different strands. The upshot, is a growing convergence in terms of theoretical and methodological tools. As Lowdres and Roberts articulate "[l]eaving the labels aside, we actually see a convergence in the work of leading institutionalist scholars around a number of 'wicked issues' which have troubled institutionalism for some time (agency, power, time and space)" (2013: 41). Effectively,

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<sup>2</sup> The term six-pack is used to collectively refer to six European legislative initiatives that were agreed in November 2011 and which collectively reform the Stability and Growth Pact governing macro-economic principles in the EU and Eurozone.

few of the strands remain pure, as theorists borrow concepts from variety of different strands.

One of the central concepts institutionalists – particularly of the historical school – have developed in order to explain institutional change and, even more so a lack of change, is path dependence. As Pierson explains, institutional actors (e.g., policymakers) will generally take decisions which reinforce earlier choices, regardless of how arbitrary those initial choices were. Through positive feedback and a process of increasing returns, “the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path.” Effectively, the further down a path one ventures, the greater become the “costs of exit” – that is, the a shift to some other feasible choice (policy or otherwise) – becomes (Pierson 2000: 252). In this way, institutions come to follow a relatively predictable trajectory and, although they continue to evolve, they remain relatively stable in their course. And yet, even in this environment of positive feedback and path dependency, the institutional balance of power may shift, resulting in “punctuated equilibrium” and an opportunity for change (first developed by Krasner 1984; see also Krook and Mackay 2011). Shifts in direction represent a move away from the predicted path of institutional evolution. As such, institutionalists generally consider that “path dependency persists during ‘normal times’ [whereas] critical junctures emerge at moments of political upheaval which are typically stimulated by external shock; during such periods, the costs of change versus continuity are reduced, and the actors are able to radically reform the existing institutional framework” (2013: 40).

Path dependency and critical junctures have been central to historical new institutionalists’ understanding of institutional change and stability for nearly twenty years. And yet, change emanating out of a single exogenous shock, or critical juncture is rather rare. However, institutions do change as they evolve, even when the evolution appears to be along the predicted trajectory. Pierson notes that “when institutions have been in place for a long time most changes will be incremental” (2004: 153). It is only seldom that major exogenous events precipitate a recalibration and propel institutions along a new, and often fundamentally different path. Over the course of the past decade, scholars have increasingly turned their gaze to the potential of seemingly small changes as a means of facilitating more substantive institutional remodelling. In this understanding of institutional change, small changes gradually accumulate. While each step seems, in and of itself, insignificant, taken together, they form the basis of a radical transformation (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Streeck and Thelen 2005). Streeck and Thelen (2005) posit that fundamental and transformative change will come about when a significant number of actors shift from one “logic” of action to another. This can be the result of a critical juncture, but more frequently will come about “gradually and continuously” (Streeck and Thelen 2005:18). Others posit that incremental change need not cumulate in a complete displacement of the prior institutional logic. Rather, two (or more) logics can co-exist within a single institution (Deeg 2005). In this case, one logic may dominate in some decisions, while others dominate in other situations (March and Olsen 2009 - confirm).

Change is also paramount to any feminist analysis. Feminist scholars are driven by a desire to understand institutional change as it is this very evolution that holds the key to

achieving the goal of gender equality. As such, change is “a key priority for anyone wanting to promote gender equality” (Waylen 2014). Arguably, it was the need to better understand institutional change and the dynamics around it that have, rather recently, inspired the feminist ‘turn’ towards new institutionalism (see, for instance, Kenny 2007; Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay et al. 2010). Feminist new institutionalists bring gender into the centre of their analyses and recognize that processes and institutions of governance are intrinsically gendered. Their analyses are informed by the seminal works of the early feminist scholars, and reveal the importance of power as gendered in all forms of institutional action. In particular, feminist institutionalists view power as pervasive, structural and mutually constitutive (Connell 2002; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998). Effectively, it is both institutional (i.e., built into institutions’ structure) and institutionalized (i.e., playing out with institutions via actors’ actions). A *feminist* new institutionalism strives for a dialogue in which institutional analyses recognize, and operationalize gender as more than a hidden norm or value. It is a defining order of society, and the gendering of structures and agents complicates the ways in which we can apprehend change and stability.

To elaborate, by the late 1980s, the thinking of many feminist scholars and activists had moved beyond notions of ‘gender’ as a social category, role and/or identity towards appreciating gender as a “patterning of difference and domination through distinctions between men and women...integral to many societal processes” (Acker 1992:554). Scholars such as R.W. Connell (1987; 2002) delineated the “patterning” and interplay of gender relations in(side) institutions and out – as the “gender regime” and “gender order,” respectively. Others turned to theorizing the institutional ‘embeddedness’ of gender (Acker 1990; Lorber 2004). In Joan Acker’s terms, “gendered institutions” connoted the presence of gender in “the processes, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life” (1992:567). Others have gone on to underscore the autonomy of gender as a “social structure,” with its processes construed as multi-dimensional – that is, institutional and institutionalized (playing out in interactions and individually internalized) – and interconnected (Risman 1998).<sup>3</sup> As such, gender holds the same analytic import as “the economy and the polity” (Risman 2004:446).

The *hows* and *whys* of *gender’s* institutional entrenchment have informed a vast swath of feminist work for several decades. Yet, when these butt up against new institutionalist analyses of change, we find ourselves compelled to revisit their theoretical bases in order to grapple with *what* disrupts gender and what may inspire its reform. Indeed, this latter query is ‘part and parcel’ of the feminist mission. The desire to inform about the gendered *status quo* – past and present – and reform it, towards an egalitarian future, distinguishes the feminist mandate. Such “big questions” have compelled feminist scholars to turn to new institutionalism in an effort to enhance their “analytic leverage,” particularly with regard to understanding “continuity and change” in institutions (Kenny and Mackay 2009: 272, 273).

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<sup>3</sup> “If gender were primarily inside us as personalities, or primarily based in interactional stereotypes, or primarily a structure of economic inequality, we could choose one level to attach and hope for dramatic changes” (Risman 1998:162).

With rare exception (Skocpol 1992), however, new institutionalists to-date have remained predominately gender-blind. Although new institutionalists, particularly its historical and sociological proponents, concede that hidden norms and values undergird institutional processes, the *gendered* concealments have been largely neglected. In Lovenduski's terms, "...any good institutionalist should realise the importance of gender relations to the configuration of institutions. *But they do not.*" (2011:vii, *our emphasis*).

There are 'troubles' with both these sets of literatures and their understanding of institutional change. First and foremost, in practice, new institutionalist and feminists implicitly view change as progressive. It is treated as linear and on-going, but always forward-moving. While early institutionalisms considered the possibility of stop-and-go change (CITATION), the overall trajectory of change was forward. How though, can we conceptualise change that takes us *backwards*? This is more than just a pause in the forward progression of institutional change. Rather, in many ways, this is the antithesis of the advancement predicted by path dependency. In the absence of cumulative or linear progress, the change – or devolution – in the gender equality project that we see emerging out of the crises can neither be explained through the lens of a critical juncture, nor through an understanding of gradual and incremental change. While change is present, it is not the change that feminists aspire to, nor historical institutionalists would have anticipated.

If we simply borrowed and "gendered" the concepts of historical new institutionalism, it would likely lead us to the conclusion that the recent economic and fiscal crises, as a critical juncture, would act upon gender in the same way as it has upon economics and politics. At the same time, feminist understandings of institutional change are also rather limited. For example, Connell's understanding of gender as a large-scale social structure posits that each institution is driven by a contested gender regime. The gender regime may change through contradictions within institutions (1990). However, as Vickers (2011) points out, this framework does not explain why some changes are permanent and others only temporary or fleeting. As we can see below, what actually transpired during the responses to the economic and financial crises is a retrenchment of gender equality that can not be explained by either new institutionalism's reliance on critical junctures, or by feminists understanding of change as gradual and cumulative. What these two literatures do, however, is remind us of the importance of returning to the historicity of gender equality's entrenchment in the EU to understand the synergies (and lack thereof) between the crises and the bigger gender equality project; and to recognize the manner in which a consideration for gender relations – and gender equality, more precisely – have been rendered invisible in the current discussions of EU governance.

### ***Historicizing the Gender Equality Project in the EU***

New institutionalists consider change as emergent, borne out of a exogenous critical juncture, or through endogenous, small-scale cumulative shifts. Both forms of change can be at play within an institution. We believe, that the global economic and financial crises spanning 2008 to 2012 represent the convergence of both these forms of change. The

crises themselves, precipitated by a variety of external and independent forces, represent a critical juncture. They occurred at a moment in time which constitutes the culmination of twenty years of gender mainstreaming and an even longer commitment to gender equality in the EU. As such, both forms of change have come together in the crises.

As we elucidate below, feminists have long pointed to small incremental steps as evidence of a larger transformative change. [CITATION] As this was propelled onto a collision course; with the crises as a critical juncture, both feminist and new institutionalist theories would anticipate that change, to a greater or lesser degree, was inevitable. Over several decades, the European Commission has been actively working towards “mobilizing all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking in account...their possible effects on the respective situations of men and women (gender perspective)” (1996:2). However, rather than include the aforementioned “gender perspective” when charting a new course post-crisis, the EU did an about turn, treating gender equality as expendable in the process of saving the seemingly indispensable neo-liberal project. Neither feminists or new institutionalists, nor a combination of these theories, as they currently stand, can theoretically account for this retrenching of gender equality initiatives.

In order to comprehend the crisis as a critical juncture, we need to consider it in a broader historical context of competing logics in the European Union. Feminist institutionalism powerfully reminds us of the importance of such foundational underpinnings towards making sense of contemporary triumphs and tribulations in gender mainstreaming. Over the course of several decades, gender equality has gradually made inroads into the European institutions. Below, we outline the evolution of the gender equality project, highlighting, in particular, the immateriality of gender equality during the EU’s inception. Here, several points are central. First, one should not dismiss that there has been substantial progress in achieving gender equality in the EU. However, this “progress” has been piecemeal, often symbolic and contrary to the observations of many feminists, it has not been cumulative. Second, although the instruments and legislation in place may formally entrench gender equality into the EU through primary and secondary legislation, in practice, gender remains an add-on in the European project (Abels and Mushaben 2012). It is our contention that the formal steps do not represent a fundamental recognition of gender as an organizing institution with the same analytical power as the economy or polity (Risman 2004).

In a much cited characterization of the evolution of gender equality policy in the EU, Rees (1998) describes the project as comprising three approaches: equal treatment/opportunity, positive action and gender mainstreaming. She characterizes the evolution of these approaches as “tinkering,” “tailoring” and “transforming.” For Rees, the passing of the first equal treatment directive on equal pay for the same work or work of equal value in the 1970s represents the start of the “tinkering” stage. Importantly, this principle of equal treatment had already been acknowledged in Article 119 of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, albeit with a somewhat more limited application (i.e., solely to same work). In intent, Article 119 was designed primarily to deter unfair competition in the Common Market through its use of women to lower wages (Hoskyns 1996). Reflecting back, it is unlikely that the Treaty framers were guided by any principle other than economic gain and equal

competition. As Hoskyns (1996) wrote, “At no time are the interests of women considered even obliquely or the issues of social justice raised” (57). Effectively, any consideration for gender equality was absent when the ‘structure’ of the EU was laid down. Despite this lack of gender equity supports, the EU crafted its gender equality project on top of (and out of) this – arguably skewed economic edifice. This helps explain how EU’s economic aims have shaped and arguably trumped, gender equality measures. Even as the EU seeks to increase the scope and purview of its gender equality project, the focus remains on economic growth and competitiveness. The long-standing treatment of gender equality ‘as sameness’ and the confinement of its remedies to the labour market – realized in numerous equal opportunity/treatment directives – are the upshots of trying to somehow secure gender equality to the EU’s skewed structure. Subsequently, in the 1980s, the EU introduced an array of positive action measures such as women-only training and family-friendly tactics such as flexible working. These “tailoring” measures, were intended to fit women into a Common Market designed for men.

In the 1970s through to the mid 1990s, progress in the realm of gender equality policy appears to have moved forward in a gradual and incremental way. The equality project was advanced through legislative and judicial means, with a total of 13 gender equality directives being passed in four decades<sup>4</sup> Although, on balance, feminists recognize that gender equality has not yet been achieved, feminist scholars and activists inside the EU have sought solace in the belief that, for the most part, the gender equality project in the European Union is advancing (Benschop and Verloo 2006). Representatives of the EU’s institutional machinery are quick to point this out. There is, in their analyses, an implicit understanding that change is underway and it is linear. Even where progress is uneven, there is a sense that it nonetheless is favorably in motion, eventually to reach its conclusion (i.e., the EU as a gender-equitable polity). According to the European Commission’s recent *Report on Progress on Equality Between Women and Men in 2013*, “There has been progress in most areas, but achieved at an uneven pace. At this rate of change, it will take almost 30 years to reach the EU’s target of 75% of women in employment...” (Commission, 2014: 2) It is important to note that even in highlighting how much still needs to be achieved, there is an implicit expectation that the progression towards gender equality is continual and linear. While it may be uneven, progressing more quickly at some times than at others, it is generally, moving forward. And yet, on closer investigation, we realize that after 40 years of progress, the crisis has precipitated a real retreat from gender equality policy.

In 1996, the EU formally introduced gender mainstreaming, identified by Rees as part of the “transforming” of gender equality policies. Mainstreaming was conceived of as a compliment to the aforementioned approaches. However, this conceptualization of gender mainstreaming, supposedly connoted a major turning point involving a recognition of (and remedy to) the pervasiveness of gender equality in the EU. Unlike equal opportunity/treatment and positive action which thus far had targeted ‘specific’ inequities between women and men – for example, in remuneration – gender mainstreaming took a more ‘general’ aim, seeking to fundamentally change “the status quo (the mainstream)”

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<sup>4</sup> For elaboration, see [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/your\\_rights/eu\\_gender\\_equality\\_law\\_update2013\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/your_rights/eu_gender_equality_law_update2013_en.pdf).

(Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities 2008:11). Indeed, the title of the European Commission's (1996) original communication to its member states, "Incorporating Equal Opportunities for Women and Men into All Community Policies and Activities" – illuminates the all-encompassing reach of gender mainstreaming. Significantly, gender mainstreaming is mainly an approach – dependent on specific instruments to effect change. While, for instance, equal opportunity/treatment represents a legal tool to effect change, gender mainstreaming signifies a way of doing policy that brings a "gender equality perspective" into all phases of a policy's lifecycle (Council of Europe 1998:5). Gender mainstreaming sought to re-envision EU policy aims, to locate gender equality as a substantive goal and broadly promote a *modus operandi* for its realization. Therein lies its "transforming" intent.

Feminist scholars and activists generally concur that mainstreaming in the EU has not realized its promise. Its results are, at best, mixed. This apparent letdown has inspired a substantial literature that seeks to make sense of this equalizing strategy's shortcomings. These scholars and activists have pointed to a variety of factors to account for gender mainstreaming's unfulfilled promise. Curiously, however, in spite of the enduring elusiveness of "transformative" change, many of them have rather doggedly maintained their faith in its potential, deeming it a partial success or salvageable failure (see, for example, Beveridge and Nott 2002; Rees 2005; Verloo and Benschop 2006).<sup>5</sup> In so doing, they seem to assume – largely implicitly – that the small, rather fragmented reforms that gender mainstreaming has engendered are sufficient condition for the eventual realization of gender mainstreaming's broad impact. We question this optimistic supposition. A revisiting of gender and power, as feminist new institutionalists so envision, obliges us to question whether such small changes will, in fact, beget the big transformation.

Despite nearly two decades of gradual changes, at best, many feminist scholars and activists persist in believing that they bode revolutionary reform, with the EU coming to be, in the end, a gender-equal polity. Yet, with gender mainstreaming exacted in rather uneven fashion from its outset and yielding uninspiring outcomes – and with it so readily 'cast off' in the throes of the economic and financial crises – we wonder whether we have sufficiently grasped where its challenges lie.

### ***The Critical Juncture and Gender Equality's Retrenchment***

When we look at the 'big picture,' we can understand why numerous feminist view the history of gender equality in the EU as a project seemingly amassing success. It appears that gender mainstreaming is, in many ways, permeating many aspects of EU policy making. We are led to believe that gender equality, now supposedly a part of the EU's institutional makeup, will continue to evolve. Either as a result of cumulative and gradual change, or hastened through a critical juncture, we can expect the eventual achievement of a more gender-equitable polity. Even in the absence of a transformative change, the basic suppositions of feminist and new institutionalist approaches would anticipate exit from

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<sup>5</sup> There are a few, such as Fodor (2006), who do not equivocate about gender mainstreaming, judging it an undeniable failure.

this path to be costly and that, at the very least, we will continue along the same path. Neither feminists or new institutionalists, theoretically ‘standing on their own,’ can account for the retrenchment that, in fact, occurs.

The so-called Euro crisis has given rise to a profusion of policy responses ranging from stimulus packages and bailouts to the imposition of austerity measures and spending cuts to increased scrutiny of national spending plans from the EU level. This crisis is especially interesting from a policy perspective because it shifts much of the policy making response from the national level, where previous responses to external shocks typically played out, to the EU level. While the individual member states, to a greater or lesser degree, maintain some control of the specifics of the policy initiatives, the EU, represented through the European Central Bank, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, is responsible for guiding the scope and direction of the recovery. We focus here specifically on the ‘six-pack’ and up to a point, related policy initiatives. The six-pack was the primary supranational response to the economic and financial crises, with most of the other major steps taking place within an intergovernmental framework (Dinan 2012) While this does not capture the full complexity of the EU’s responses, it does offer a snapshot of the aims to reform the structures of governance in the wake of the sovereign debt crisis.

The “six-pack” is a collection of five regulations and one directive designed to strengthen and reshape European fiscal and macroeconomic policy<sup>6</sup>. They came into force on December 13, 2011, less than six weeks after they were agreed on<sup>7</sup>. There were two main points to the legislation: one, strengthening and Europeanizing fiscal policy (accomplished through the measures in three of the regulations and the directive) and two, scrutinizing and correcting macroeconomic imbalances in the euro area (two regulations). The measures are designed to work in conjunction with other, previously agreed mechanisms, including the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and the European Semester. They also form a basis onto which further legislation, such as the ‘two-pack,’<sup>8</sup>, then builds. Together, these mechanisms represent the fundamental restructuring and renegotiation of the Stability and Growth Pact<sup>9</sup>, begun in 2010 (De la Parra 2013). As such, we can view these as a fundamental reorganization of economic and fiscal governance in the EU. It is, therefore, *a transformative response to a critical juncture*.

The European Commission refers to the six-pack as “a new architecture for European economic governance” (Europa 2011). For our purposes, it is sufficient to consider the

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<sup>6</sup> List the actual directives here

<sup>7</sup> Notably, the legislation was passed exceptionally quickly, for EU standards indicating its esteemed importance but also resulting in a partial shift in the institutional roles of the various institutions (Dinan 2012). For example, the role of chief mediator was taken on by the Council Presidency rather than the Commission. For its part, the Parliament was under increased pressure to approve the responses quickly, and according to some MEPs this limited the effectiveness of the EPs role. For more on the internal institutional dynamics, see Dinan 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The two-pack refers to two further directives, that came into force in May 2013 . These regulations are applicable to all Euro-zone member states . “The new measures mean increased transparency on their budgetary decisions, stronger coordination in the euro area starting with the 2014 budgetary cycle, and the recognition of the special needs of euro area Member States under severe financial pressure.”

<sup>9</sup> An agreement among the member states to maintain certain debt and deficit levels in order to maintain the stability of the Economic and Monetary Union. Originally agreed in 1997, the SGP forms the basis of both the six-pack and the two-pack.

six-pack as working to restructure the fiscal and macroeconomic landscape in three ways. It completes the European Semester, which gives the European Commission and Council of Europe some input into member state budgets; it enhances the European Commission's monitoring capacity over member states' fiscal policies and allows for increased surveillance in cases of financial instability; it further seeks to harmonize national budgetary processes. This, in our view, represents a response to the critical juncture through a fundamental change in the governance of economic and fiscal policy in the EU. The change in the balance of power, resulting here from a partial shift of governance away from the national to the European level precipitates a wider institutional change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). A report carried out for DG Justice recognizes that “[t]ransferring decisions from the national context to the EU level, where gender has a firmly embedded place in policy-making, could imply that gender can receive greater relevance in the formation of macroeconomic policy” (2013: 116). In the case of the six-pack, we see that this is not the case. Neither the European nor the national level offered a place for gender to be considered in relation to macroeconomic policy.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the individual national plans, there are several studies that have shown that the principles of gender equality were in no way considered or maintained by member state governments (Annesley and Scheele 2011; Leschke and Jepsen 2012; Rubery 2010). However, we know that gender is intrinsic to all societies as a social structure unto itself (Epstein 2006; Risman 1998). Additionally, gender is deeply entangled with the economy and political life. As shifts take place in one of these areas, they propel shifts in the connected fields. As such, the crises are “gendered”, the failure to recognize this in responses to the economic and financial crises does not alter this basic fact. However, the failure to mobilize gender mainstreaming – to take into account the fundamental importance of gender equality at this critical juncture – represents retrenchment.

How does this manifest? Most apparently, there are no explicit references to gender equality or “women/men” in the six-pack legislation. It is for this reason, tempting to suggest that the EU's response to the financial crisis was gender-neutral. If we look to the official, formalized responses expressed in the six-pack, there is no mention of gender, women/men or even families. The target and reference point of the six-pack legislation is the institutional mechanisms of governance. Member states are expected to implement the measures outlined in the six-pack in a manner that is consistent with the principles of European integration. Theoretically, this leaves room for a ‘gender perspective’ to be brought into the process in both the EU and the national policy arenas.

Feminist scholars and activists have been quick to highlight the problems in the ways in which the EU has framed and executed its responses and the ways in which member state policies, in compliance with the EU's framing have been detrimental to women's overall gender equality (for example, see...). There are very few feminists who have looked to a new institutionalist approach to make sense of the gendered processes at play (Walby, Young are exceptions). A few scholars, whom we discuss below, have sought to uncover the exacerbation of structural inequalities through the reform processes, but, by and large, this has not been the focus of feminists. Rather, the majority of feminist scholarship

around the economic and financial crises emphasize policy outcomes and inequalities which are reinforced through various policy responses (Rubery and Karamissini 2014; others). While these are essential to our overall understanding of the crisis and gender's position therein, the focus on outcomes rather than structures and processes leads researchers to very different observations than what our a feminist institutionalist approach can do.

In gender mainstreaming, policy actors are asked to consider the ways in which policy initiatives could have contributed to a differential impact on the lives of men and women. Although the six-pack legislation itself does not appear to have been subject to gender mainstreaming, several reports and policy documents commissioned by the EU do highlight the potential dangers of economic and fiscal restructuring for the gender equality project. The Commission's Report on *Equality between Women and Men 2010*, which was researched and written in the early days of the crises, emphasised that the crises could act as a critical juncture extending "the opportunity to implement policies to make the labour market and society more gender equal in the future" (Commission 2010: 7?). The report successfully considers gender as a fundamental principle around which society and the economy are organized, frequently reiterating the belief that "gender equality is a precondition for growth, employment and social cohesion, and must therefore be considered part of the solution to exiting the crisis" (3). This report, and others, recognized that the crises could actually engender gender-inequitable impacts, and recommends that "in order to limit the negative repercussions of the economic crisis on the equal participation of women and men in the labour market, policy makers have to build their policy responses on a gender sensitive analysis of the labour market as well as systemic gender impact assessments and evaluations" (11). Unfortunately for the gender project, this was not implemented. Numerous other documents (list) offer suggestions for gender-sensitive indicators which would increase the visibility of women in policy and policy research. These too were not implemented in the formulation of the six-pack.

Gender mainstreaming is an important contribution to the gender equality project. And yet, mainstreaming alone, we argue, is insufficient. As evidenced in a European Parliament report from 2012, "although gender equality is interpreted as a precondition for sustainable, competitive and inclusive growth, and gender policies as part of the response for the challenge, its inclusion in the EU 2020 is surprisingly infrequent. It seems that gender equality policies and its monitoring processes continue to be considered a short-term cost rather than long-term investments" (16).

### ***Conclusion***

At the outset this paper, we suggested that feminists and new institutionalists alike have given us cause to believe that the gender equality project in the EU is advancing slowly and, in a more or less continual way. Each step builds upon an earlier one contributing supposedly to the ultimately realization of its gender equality project. However, an examination of the crises and the EU's ensuing responses, reflects a fundamental lack of appreciation of the relevance of gender relations and gender equality, more specifically, for its institutional well-being. In the recovery project and in the EU's subsequent

restructuring of its institutions of governance, efforts to dismantle its inbuilt gender inequities are largely absent.

Whether deliberate or not, examination of the six pack legislation indicates that gender is not recognized as a fundamental facet of the EU institutional makeup. The window of opportunity, we see as afforded through the crisis to re-craft the EU polity in a more gender-equitable fashion was closed.

While the gender ‘blind spot’ manifest in the EU’s responses – as an institution – to the crisis is empirically noteworthy; we struggle to theoretically make sense of this outcome, relying on existing tools in feminist and new institutionalist scholarship. We position ourselves in a larger theory-building project that seeks to bring feminist and new institutionalist insights to bear on one another. On their own, these varied approaches lead us to believe that the crises would offer an important opportunity for a gender-equitable change. And, yet this was not the outcome. Rather, we argue, the institutional fallout from the EU’s responses yielded *more* gender *inequity* and more profoundly, illuminated a failure to appreciate the integral nature of gender to its very constitution. We conceptualize this as a manifestation of *institutional retrenchment*. The crises and their responses have undoubtedly been gendered but with the EU’s masculinist anchoring fortified. From our vantage point, this is crisis of a different sort. The EU’s neo-liberal disposition has been more deeply entrenched and its gender equality retrenched – now part of the wreckage of the economic and financial crises. What can be salvaged? We have no easy answer to this query, but making any substantive headway requires recognizing this institutional regress.