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## Paying lip service to gender inequality – EU rural development policy in Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

While research has pointed to the lack of gender mainstreaming in rural and agricultural policy, how rural policy determines what is seen as problems of gender inequality in the first place and how it constructs men and women in relation to rural development remains unexplored. In this article we perform an in-depth analysis of how rural policy constructs gender inequality problems and gendered subjects. We employ the ‘What’s the problem represented to be’ approach to analyse the implementation of the European Union’s Rural Development Policy in one Swedish region, Jönköping County. We conclude that gender inequality is largely left unproblematic in relation to rural development, placing women in the subject position of being uninterested in rural development policy and lacking the ability to take it on. The focus on farmers and ICT broadband positions adult, Swedish-born men as the norm, reflecting a neoliberal emphasis on economic growth through competitive businesses. We also conclude that the policy twists ‘gender mainstreaming’ by claiming that it promotes gender equality, while it in fact takes no action. Paying lip service to gender equality rural policy thereby co-opts feminism, in line with a neoliberal ‘postfeminist’ discourse, which is harmful to the feminist project. Alternative approaches to gender inequalities suggest that there may be broader, and different, ways of discussing them in relation to rural development, making for a broader spectrum of problematisations and subject positions, which may, in turn, allow a transformation towards gender equality.

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## Introduction

Sweden joined the European Union (EU) in 1995 and has since then helped finance and implement what is by far the most costly of all EU policies. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which includes the Rural Development Policy (RDP), has been heavily criticised for encouraging overproduction, causing environmental problems, and giving citizens little value for money (Alons and Zwaan 2016; Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020). Nonetheless, it is prioritised; its total budget between 2014–2020 was 408 billion Euro, which is 38 per cent of the total EU budget (Sgueo, Tropea and Augere-Granier 2016), and its total budget for 2021–2027 is 387 billion Euro, as listed on the European Commission's website in 2022.

Challenging gender inequalities has been on the EU agenda since the 1958 Treaty of Rome, and was accentuated by the launch of gender mainstreaming in 1996. However, the CAP and RDP have not mainstreamed gender (Bock 2015; Shortall 2015). Rather, the CAP discriminates against women, since it does not challenge gender inequalities related to farming as an occupation (Shortall and Marangudakis 2022). Gender equality efforts have been limited to integrating the category of women into existing projects and programmes (Arora-Jonsson and Leder 2021; Prügl 2009; Shortall 2015). While these findings make important contributions to the literature on the lack of gender mainstreaming, the role of rural policy in producing policy problems related to gender inequality and the concurrent construction of gendered subjects remains underexplored. In this article, we therefore perform an in-depth analysis of the EU rural policy, focusing on Sweden, with the aim of analysing how rural policy constructs gender inequality policy problems and gendered subjects.

Sweden is ranked as one of the most gender equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum 2020) and, consequently, within the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). Yet gender inequalities in agriculture, forestry and rural areas persist (Andersson 2014; Andersson and Lidestav 2014; Arora-Jonsson 2017). Further, agriculture has been found to be one of Sweden's least gender equal sectors, which is seen as a political challenge (Ds 2004:39). We believe a study of a well-chosen case may have important lessons applicable to agricultural and rural development policy, in the EU and beyond. We selected Jönköping County, a region that has been well-researched from an entrepreneurship, development, and gender perspective (see Ahl et al. 2023; Berglund et al. 2023; Forsberg 1998; Pettersson 2004; Tillmar et al. 2022; Wigren-Kristoferson 2003). This approach allows us to make an in-depth analysis, as well as to build on our prior knowledge on gender and rural women entrepreneurs in the region.

We employ Bacchi's (2009) *What's the problem represented to be* approach for the analysis, as it is useful for uncovering what is constructed, taken for granted, and communicated in policy. Bacchi (2009) makes the point that

problems are actually constructed through a political process and often created in such a way that a solution can be found. Moreover, problem formulations will determine, or limit, what course of action can be taken. In this article, we attempt to re-politicise gender in EU rural development discussions, as called for by Bock (2015). Such a contribution is important in order to challenge the policy problems currently represented and to reflect on alternative problematisations of gender inequality in relation to rural development. Our contribution also seeks to counteract the risk of taking for granted what might appear to be a serious engagement with gender inequality, but which only pays lip service to 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender awareness'. Moreover, we study gender equality in EU policy formulations on the national and regional levels, which is key, since the new CAP 2023-27 for the first time includes gender equality and an increased participation of women in farming.

## Gender in EU rural development policy

### *The common agricultural policy and the rural development policy – a brief history*

While the EU rural development support is a relatively late construct, agricultural support dates back to the initial establishment of a common market, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and the Treaty of Rome (European Parliament 2022). National interventions in agriculture, which were strong in all of the six original Member States, were incompatible with the creation of a common market and therefore transferred to the ECSC level. The reason, it was argued, was that agriculture is marked by permanent market instability, and therefore 'governments have always been keen to regulate agricultural markets and to support farmers' incomes, a tendency inherited by the CAP (European Parliament 2022). The objectives of the CAP – to support agricultural production, the agricultural community, and farmers – are largely unchanged since the Treaty of Rome (TFEU 2016). Over the years, the CAP has been criticised for inducing overproduction, destabilising markets for agricultural produce, causing environmental problems, giving citizens little value for money, and an unequal distribution between Member States and farm types; it has therefore undergone a range of shifts (Alons and Zwaan 2016; Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020). A 1992 reform sharply reduced market support and support for farmers' incomes; further reforms in the 2000s decoupled direct payments from agricultural production and rural development became part of the CAP (Alons and Zwaan 2016; Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020). However, the CAP and the addition of the RDP has been described as 'largely an agricultural programme with a little bit of rural development tacked on at the end' (Shortall and Bock 2015, 664).

### *EU discourses on agricultural and rural development*

Uninformed by a gender approach, discourse analysis has found three main positions in the CAP debate (Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020; Potter and Tilzey 2005), namely (1) a neoliberal discourse arguing for competitiveness and quality production, utilising an economic vocabulary of market productivism that represents farmers as entrepreneurs; (2) a 'counter-discourse' of agricultural multifunctionality, arguing for the support of agricultural functions such as biodiversity creation, landscape and cultural heritage, and including an element of agri-environmentalism; and (3) a 'neomercantilist' discourse, arguing in favour of protecting and supporting the productive capacity and export potential of family farming, deeply rooted in a presumption of the economic vulnerability of farmers to the free market.

### *Gender and the CAP and RDP*

Studies focusing on the CAP and RDP from a gender perspective consistently question them. The CAP has been found to cement gender inequalities, since agriculture is perceived as a sector rather than an occupation. Support is based on land ownership rather than employment, whereby gender inequalities, including the continued stereotyping of the farmer as a man, gender segregated work and women doing unpaid farm work, are neither scrutinised nor challenged (Shortall and Marangudakis 2022).

The CAP has not mainstreamed gender and contains no gender equality targets, objectives or goals; rather, gender mainstreaming has become a technical, form-filling exercise (Bock 2015; Shortall 2015). This has been explained by the fact that men own farmland to a much larger extent than women (Shortall 2015), and by gender hierarchies in 'new rural governance' (Bock 2015). If gender mainstreaming is to be transformative, the issue of land ownership needs to be addressed, which it currently is not (Shortall 2015). Also, research on gender mainstreaming has noted the framing of agricultural policy within a neoliberal ideology of market-led development (Arora-Jonsson and Leder 2021).

Existing programmes target women, not gender inequalities, and efforts have thereby been limited to encouraging women entrepreneurs (Prügl 2009; Shortall 2015), who were found to be less likely to receive CAP subsidies than men (Anthopoulou 2010; Shortall and Marangudakis 2022). A study of the implementation of the RDP in Slovenia found that farms did not develop in terms of gender equality, which was explained by women's unequal access to farmland and agricultural education, and by weak institutional support (Černič Istenič 2015). Shortall (2015) argues that addressing gender inequalities in agriculture within the EU might actually threaten the viability of farm businesses, since the accomplishment of agriculture relies on women's unpaid labour and their off-farm employment.

In the UK, women and the community sector were found to be side-lined through a 'new rural governance' that demanded private-public partnerships, competitive bidding and large contracts, which created a masculine atmosphere and male leadership (Little and Jones 2000). Bock (2015) noted that women's involvement was also low in the EU LEADER policy, despite its supposedly bottom-up approach. Prügl (2010) found that gender mainstreaming was not implemented in LEADER programmes in two German regions. Civil goals were subordinated to economic goals, which was frustrating for participants, who questioned whether partnerships are democratic since they are self-selected, consist of local elites, marginalise women, amongst others, and include internal power struggles (Shortall 2008). At the same time, they handle large sums of taxpayers' money outside the remit of public control. In contrast, according to Anthopoulou (2010), some EU initiatives for rural development within the framework of farm diversification and community regeneration may have strengthened gender equality by presenting women with opportunities for improving their socio-economic position.

### *Gender in the Swedish implementation of the CAP and RDP*

Studies have also noted the lack of a gender equality approach in the implementation of the CAP and RDP in Sweden (Glesbygdsverket 2008; Ds 2004:39). Only 16 per cent of the applications for the Swedish RDP in 2007-2013 came from women (Wigren-Kristoferson 2013). Further, applications for funding submitted by men, the majority of which concerned the modernisation of agriculture, were more likely to be successful. A study found that a 'new project class' consisting of middle-aged, white, educated men was emerging in new rural governance, and that old elites were reappearing in new forms in local action groups, in the LEADER context (Arora-Jonsson 2017). However, Arora-Jonsson (2017) found that women had gained influence through informal networking, and in some places become high-level civil servants - suggesting that gender and class power hierarchies enable some women to benefit from existing power structures.

This article contributes an analysis of the role of rural policy in producing policy problems related to gender inequality as well as gendered subjects to the above literature, which tends to focus on the lack of gender mainstreaming.

## **Methodology and material**

### *Geographical context: Jönköping county*

The geographical context of this article is Jönköping County, which has been characterised by a 'traditional gender contract' (Forsberg 1998), and ranked near the bottom of 'gender equality lists' in Sweden (The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions 2016). It has a comparatively low share of

women in municipal political bodies, a large degree of gender segregation in the labour market and a large gender pay gap (Länsstyrelsen 2017). Nonetheless, the region has been represented as a role model for entrepreneurship and home to an 'entrepreneurial spirit' (Wigren-Kristoferson 2003), positioning men as entrepreneurs, while women entrepreneurs have been rendered invisible (Pettersson 2004). Four out of five farms are owned by men, while forestry firm ownership is more evenly distributed among women and men. Around 9 per cent of women and 18 per cent of men in rural areas are self-employed, which corresponds to the national figures (Tillmar et al. 2022). Women's rural businesses are not significantly smaller than those of men; however, women's income is lower. And while marriage has positive effects for the earnings of men, it has negative effects for women's earnings (Tillmar et al. 2022). 'Being able to shape one's own destiny' is a key motivator for rural women entrepreneurs in the region, whose businesses are vital for rural development, since they provide a wide range of essential services (Ahl et al. 2023).

In seeking to establish that a gender equal RDP 2014–2020 was performed, a women's advocacy NGO ran a pilot project prior to its implementation in Jönköping County (WINNET Sverige 2013). The suggestions for gender equality included setting specific quantitative goals; allocating a budget; broadening the economic sectors eligible for support, thus redefining and broadening the innovation concept; aiming towards the national gender equality goals; and ensuring the inclusion of gender equality experts in the County Administrative Board's work on rural development. How these suggestions, and the gender inequalities identified in the above studies, were taken on board (or not) in the Jönköping RDP 2014–2020, will be further discussed below.

## Methodology

By employing the What's the problem represented to be approach (WPR) (Bacchi 2009), we look at how problems are represented in policy rather than taking them for granted. This approach is widely used, although not yet extensively applied to rural development policy (for exceptions see Andersson et al. 2018; Engström and Hajdu 2019; Holmgren and Arora-Jonsson 2015). The approach builds on a social constructionist epistemology in which language, or discourse, is seen as constitutive of reality, rather than merely representational. Policy problems are made through what Bacchi calls *problematizations*. In other words, bodies that institute policies do not primarily react to problems, but are active in producing problems. The WPR approach is about understanding and questioning problem constructions, rather than solving problems.

We add an element of image analysis to the WPR approach. The image analysis is inspired by Keller, Lloyd, and Bell (2015), who made an analysis of



identifying, describing, and categorising portrayals of gender in relation to rurality.

We also draw on a post-structural feminist perspective, which fits well epistemologically and ontologically with the WPR approach. This perspective characterises gendering processes and practices as products of power relations that have emerged from historical processes, dominant discourses, and institutions (Calás, Smircich, and Bourne 2007). Gender is understood as distanced from an individual's personal experiences and regarded as produced in a discourse of gender difference built on dichotomised categories. What is also interesting in relation to this article, as will be evident below, is the centrality of gender difference in the discourse of underrepresentation, i.e. a low number/share of women in a certain realm (Convertino 2020). Bacchi (2017), too, stresses that policies constitute who we are in terms of gender; we therefore ask how rural policy 'genders', how it encourages the production of features and actions associated with women and men. To understand how rural policy constructs gender inequality problems and gendered subjects, we turn to reasoning on how feminism has been co-opted by neoliberalism and a neoliberal 'postfeminist' discourse has emerged, whereby feminism is transformed into technocratic 'gender mainstreaming' (Bock 2015; Shortall 2015), and which transfers responsibility from the collective to the individual, e.g. through encouraging individual women to start their own business, compete in the marketplace and contribute to economic growth (Berglund et al. 2018).

### **Material**

We include six documents from the EU, national and regional levels for our analysis (see Table 1). Our focus is, however, on the regional level, which is where the EU policies are played out 'on the ground'.

The EU regulation for RDPs requires that the Member States draw up their national RDPs, which the EU Commission then has to approve, and which is based on the needs of the Member States and address at least four of the six EU priorities, including focus areas each with their specific targets and budgets (Official Journal of the European Union 2013). The Swedish Government has chosen to pursue all six EU priorities in its national RDP (see Table 2).

The Jönköping County Administrative Board has followed suit in their *Regional Action Plan for the Rural Development Programme and Maritime and Fishery Programme 2014–2020* (The County Administrative Board in Jönköping County 2017) which we hereafter call the 'Action Plan'. Sweden has 21 County Administrative Boards which are national government authorities charged with a range of tasks, including implementing national objectives. The Action Plan has been approved by the Swedish Board of Agriculture. They are together with three other governmental agencies responsible for distributing



**Table 1.** Material analysed.

Policy document	No. of pages	Author (publication year)
<i>Regional Action Plan for the Rural Development Programme and Maritime and Fishery Programme 2014–2020.</i>	203	The County Administrative Board in Jönköping County (2017).
<i>SWOT-analysis for the County of Jönköping.</i>	66	The County Administrative Board in Jönköping County (2013).
<i>Sweden - Rural Development Programme (National) (2014–2020).</i>	724	Government Offices of Sweden (2016).
<i>Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on Support for Rural Development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005, L 347/487.</i>	62	Official Journal of the European Union (2013).

**Table 2.** EU priorities for rural development.

Priority 1	Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas.
Priority 2	Enhancing the viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture, and promoting innovative farm technologies and sustainable forest management.
Priority 3	Promoting food chain organisation, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture.
Priority 4	Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry.
Priority 5	Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift toward a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors.
Priority 6	Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

support and compensation to rural actors in order to meet the EU priorities (see Table 2), which is in practice what the RDP is about, according to their websites in 2023. The Action Plan includes an analysis of the county's rural strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (hereafter SWOT) (The County Administrative Board in Jönköping County 2013). The SWOT was required by all County Administrative Boards, by the national Government. Yet the influence of the SWOT on the Action Plan is weak, as we will show below.

### Analysis

We have followed Bacchi's (2009) suggestion of posing six WPR questions to analyse the policy problems represented to perform our analysis. The first author analysed the documents, following the WPR questions and their specifications, which worked as a way of operationalising gender mainstreaming and the construction of gendered subjects (see Table 3).

A preliminary analysis resulted in a 40-page document with quotes (kept with the authors). These findings were then collated, and resulted in the identification of preliminary policy problematisations and constructions of women and men. After these steps were performed, the first and third authors met for two one-day workshops to discuss the interpretations. After re-drafting the analysis, it was then discussed with the other two authors. All quotes in the findings section were translated from Swedish into English by the authors.

## Gender inequality is silenced as a problem

### *Gender inequality left unproblematic*

We find that gender inequality is represented as a problem in relation to rural development in a highly limited way, rather than being seen as a power issue intrinsic to the shaping of rural development (cf. Arora-Jonsson 2017; Arora-Jonsson and Leder 2021; Bock 2015; Shortall and Bock, 2015). In fact, there is no mention of the concept of gender inequality in the Action Plan. However, the word count demonstrates that the term 'gender equality' occurs 29 times in the Action Plan, 8 times in the SWOT, 55 times in the national RDP (Government Offices of Sweden 2016) and zero times in the EU regulation (Official Journal of the European Union 2013). The term 'women' is mentioned 42 times and 'men' 14 times in the Action Plan, while 'women' occurs 52 times and 'men' 20 times in the SWOT. Thus 'women' occurs almost three times more often than 'men' in both documents. This indicates that gender inequality is left unproblematic, and that rural policy constructs gendered subjects mainly as women, which in turn might suggest that women are constructed as a problem, and/or gender inequality as a woman problem.

Gender inequality is largely compartmentalised into a section towards the end of the Action Plan which focuses on communication and outreach, mirroring the national RDP which is most explicit on gender (in)equality in relation to communication (Government Offices of Sweden 2016). Nevertheless, the Action Plan states that it has been gender mainstreamed: 'The Action Plan was gender mainstreamed, for example by descriptions of how priorities and selection criteria influence the conditions for women and men who apply for support, and by having representatives in the partnership with competence in gender equality' (Action Plan 2017, 3).

Despite this assurance, we find no signs of mainstreaming gender in line with the EU definition as listed on the European Commission's website in 2023, referring to the European Institute for Gender Equality, which: 'involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination'. The Action Plan does not contain any definition of gender mainstreaming, nor any discussion of what it might further imply.

### *Women's and men's unequal terms in business and employment*

Gender inequality is problematised in a very limited way in the Action Plan. It is only discussed with regard to the different conditions women and men have for starting and developing businesses in agriculture and the

**Table 3.** Operationalisation of gender mainstreaming and the construction of gendered subjects.

WPR question	Specification of WPR question	Analysis
Q1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy?	An exercise of clarification. 'Think differently.'	Cross-comparison of policy (problems) at EU and national levels; the SWOT; the pilot project; and, studies in the literature review.
	How are funds targeted within a proposal?	Allocations of funds at national and regional levels clarified and compared.
Q2: What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?	What is assumed? What is taken for granted? What is not questioned?	Word count of concepts: e.g. 'gender equality', 'woman', 'man'. Image analysis of 'rurality', gender and other 'difference'.
	What binaries are built on in the problem representations?	Interrogation of the women and men binary in policy (problems) and imagery.
	What are the key concepts and what meanings are given to these concepts? What people categories are used? How do they give meaning to the problem representations?	Comparison of key concepts to literature. Identification of people categories e.g. farmer; business-owner; support applicant.
	Statistics produce knowledge of a certain kind, therefore ask: Why these statistics and not others?	Examination of statistics.
Q3: How has the representation of the problem come about?	Reflect over non-discursive practices: decisions and developments that contribute to the problem representation.	Reflection on the decisions and developments in EU, Swedish and the Action Plan, based on literature.
	Recognise competing problem representations: genealogy, helps destabilising the taken-for-granted problem representations.	Policy genealogy by studying the literature. Identification of links between the problem representations in policies, at the various levels (EU, national and regional).
Q4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?	What issues and perspectives are silenced?	Identification of silences by cross-comparing different parts of the Action Plan and the SWOT, and the literature. Identification of where key concepts were discussed.
Q5: What effects are produced by the problem representation?	Three kinds of effects: a. discursive effects, b. subjectification effects, and c. lived effects.	Collation of the responses to WPR- questions and image analysis.
Q6: How has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?	Allows sharpened awareness of the contestation surrounding representation of the 'problem'.	Examination of who produced the policy problems, including comparing the policy documents to literature.

Source: WPR questions and specifications of WPR questions based on Bacchi (2009).

manufacturing industry (cf. Prügl 2009; Shortall 2015). We note, however, that this problem is not explicitly defined in terms of gender inequality:

Women and men should have equal terms to start and develop businesses in Jönköping County. Presently, women are business managers to a lesser extent than men. The number of women employed in agriculture has increased and the County Administrative Board of Jönköping aims to support that trend, to enable more employment opportunities in the agricultural sector for both women and men. In

Jönköping County, about 80 per cent of the business owners in agriculture, forestry and fishery are men. There is a similar distribution of women and men among those employed in agriculture, forestry and fishery in Jönköping County (Action Plan 2017, 48).

Rather than defining the problem in terms of gender inequality, a more generic term indicating sameness or similarity is used in this extract (*'lika villkor'* vs *'ojämställd'*). The Swedish language makes an important distinction here, while in English (*equal terms* vs *gender equal*) the term 'equal' seems more closely linked to gender (in)equality. Further, there is no explicit discussion as to what the unequal terms for women and men are. Rather, it is established that fewer women than men are business owners, in particular in agriculture. But the question of why the share of women is so low is not explored. It also mentions employment, which the Action Plan identifies in relation to a positive trend – of more women being employed in agriculture – rather than a problem. Even though the share of women employed in agriculture is strikingly low, the Action Plan leaves it as unproblematic. The Action Plan makes no point of the differences between women's and men's ownership in agriculture and forestry – where forestry ownership is more evenly distributed (Tillmar et al. 2022).

We also find that the problematisation of women's and men's different terms for starting and developing businesses does not include a recognition of the gendered power relations that lead to differences in ownership in the first place, such as patrilineal transfer of property and land, gendered divisions of labour or gendered identities (cf. Andersson 2014; Andersson and Lidestav 2014; Shortall 2015; Shortall and Marangudakis 2022). The focus on women and men as business managers also reflects the neoliberal discourse in CAP centred on competitiveness and constructing rural development as a market matter (cf. Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020; Potter and Tilzey 2005). This is also reflective of a neoliberal postfeminist discourse in encouraging individual women (and men) to start their own business and contribute to economic growth (Berglund et al. 2018).

We find that the Action Plan echoes the national RDP's (Government Offices of Sweden 2016) and the EU's (Official Journal of the European Union 2013) silencing of gender inequality. But while the Action Plan does not explicitly mention gender inequality, the national RDP does. Also, the national RDP has a somewhat broader approach, mentioning living and working conditions beyond starting and developing businesses: 'Gender equality and inclusion of new groups [Heading]. Women and men should have equal opportunities, rights, and possibilities to work in agriculture as well as to live and work in rural areas' (Government Offices of Sweden 2016, 683). This approach has not trickled down to the Action Plan.

### *Gender (in)equality a problem of attracting 'underrepresented groups'*

The Action Plan suggests solving the issue of skewed business ownership between women and men by constructing it as a problem of underrepresented groups: 'The County Administrative Board of Jönköping strives, as far as possible, to consider underrepresented groups in the industries concerned in the handling [of applications]' (Action Plan 2017, 3). An approach to gender inequality which neglects gendered power relations and instead focuses on individual women (as well as youth and foreign-born citizens) applicants for support has thus been selected. In conjunction with the mention of women's and men's different terms for businesses etc., the following 'solution', constructing the subject position of women as underrepresented among support applicants, is offered:

As women are currently underrepresented, applications that increase gender equality will be considered when applications otherwise achieve the same points within the selection criteria. The goal of prioritising the underrepresented group is to increase the proportion of women entrepreneurs and the proportion of women employed in the industry. (Action Plan 2017, 48. Similar formulations feature on pages 58 and 61).

The problem and its solution is thus turned into a technical, administrative issue of application procedures (cf. Bock 2015; Shortall 2015). While such an approach might lead to an increase in the share of women among approved applicants, it is not automatically linked to an increased share of women among business owners and employed. We cannot see how prioritising the underrepresented group of women among support applicants contributes to increasing the proportion of women as entrepreneurs and employed in rural areas. The problem of gender inequality – which was highly limited from the outset – is thus narrowed down even further, from women's and men's different terms for businesses and a low share of women to women being underrepresented among support applicants. This resembles the narrowing down in the national RDP, as it addressed the fact that fewer women than men had applied for support and therefore aimed to increase women's share of support applicants. We find that the problem that women are underrepresented among support applicants is to be solved by prioritising them as underrepresented groups, and by attracting them to apply through 'gender equal communication' of information.

### *Prioritising women as an underrepresented group*

Women, as well as youth and 'people with a foreign background', are constructed as underrepresented groups in the Action Plan as follows: 'Women, young people and people with a foreign background are mentioned in the [national] programmes as groups that it is important to reach' (Action Plan

2017, 123). Representing them as groups, we suggest, puts a limit around them and separates them from a gender, age and 'ethnic' 'neutral' norm. Constructing the subject positions of women, youth and 'foreign-born' as underrepresented subsequently positions adult/older, Swedish-born, white men as the norm, as it draws on a gender difference based on dichotomised categories (cf. Calás, Smircich, and Bourne 2007; Convertino 2020).

We further find that 'grouping' homogenises them as Others, and also eradicates intersectional diversities between these persons. Those positioned as underrepresented are simultaneously constructed as the problem solvers, since it is through their willingness to apply for funding and engage in agriculture and manufacturing that the status quo can be changed. The onus is thus on othered individuals to rectify their marginalised position within power relations related to gender, ethnicity, race, and age.

Paradoxically, while the Action Plan suggests prioritising certain groups as a solution to their underrepresentation amongst applicants, it also emphasises that it is, in reality, impossible to employ affirmative action, gender quotas or criteria based on 'sex' or other 'categories', as they might conflict with legislation: 'There are no criteria based on the categories of sex, age, ethnicity, ableism etc. This is because criteria in this area risk coming into conflict with legislation and legal practice' (Action Plan 2017, 23). Again, we note that while the Action Plan does not define what gender equality means, it stresses what it does not mean, namely affirmative action.

### *'Gender equal communication'*

The other side of the 'solution' to the problem of women as underrepresented among applicants is to attract them to apply through what is called gender equal communication of information. This responds to the national RDP's call to the County Administrative Boards to 'ensure that the information material for all parts of the programme should be gender mainstreamed' (Government Offices of Sweden 2016, 679). Interestingly, this is the only time the national RDP mentions gender mainstreaming, indicating a lack of interest in this approach. The County Administrative Board has used a 'communication concept' of illustrations, colours, and fonts, which is designed to attract women through being 'gender-aware':

The thinking is that that the pictures present a gender-aware communication of images. The images are designed in such a way that everyone, irrespective of sex, age or background, will be able to understand the message and become interested in the programmes (Action Plan 2017, 123).

This approach of 'gender equal communication' constructs women as unable to apply for support due to the lack of certain images, colours, and fonts and, thus, as individuals who have problems interpreting the Action Plan

without such communication. This strongly reflects the positioning of women as lacking the ability to find and interpret information, constructed in the national RDP:

Support recipients and other target groups shall experience that it is easy to find and understand the information about the programme. The sub-messages shall be adapted to every target group and situation. The communication shall be adapted to reach women and men as well as youth and persons with a foreign background (Government Offices of Sweden 2016, 683).

Again, the approach to gender inequality, neglecting power relations and approaching individual women support applicants, is confirmed, and othered individuals are supposed to solve the problems power relations cause in agriculture and rural areas through being attracted – by certain communication – to seek support funding.

### *The '4R method' is mentioned, but not used*

The Action Plan largely compartmentalises the explicit mentioning of gender inequality to a section focused on communication towards the end of the document. In this section it also states that the 4R method will be used to improve the work on gender equality. (This method builds on the so-called 3R method which was developed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities [2002] and investigator Gertrud Åström):

R1 - Representation. To the extent possible, the County Administrative Board will divide statistics by gender. R2 and R3 - Resources and Realia. The County Administrative Board will, together with a gender equality expert, continuously analyse how funds within the programmes are distributed by sex and what effects this has in the county. R4 - Realise. The County Administrative Board of Jönköping County has chosen to take the underrepresented sex into account in the sub-measures where possible (Action Plan 2017, 123).

As explicit as the Action Plan is on gender equality work, it effectively limits the potential of the 4R method, the efforts which could have come from using the results following a 4R method analysis and, again, waters them down to concern the underrepresentation of women. R1-R3 come down to numbers, and R4 is very general and without any clear commitments. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that the Action Plan has made use of the 4R analysis, as no results are presented.

### *Older, Swedish men farmers are the norm*

By constructing the subject positions of women, youth, and foreign-born as underrepresented groups, we find that adult, Swedish-born men are positioned as the norm in the Action Plan (cf. Convertino 2020). The construction



of a male norm is reinforced by placing farmers as the ‘main target group’ for support: ‘The Rural Development Plan’s main target groups are: farmers, rural business owners and other actors in rural areas’ (Action Plan 2017, 121), reflecting the national RDP (Government Offices of Sweden 2016, 683). Targeting farmers means targeting men, as the overwhelming majority, 77 per cent, of farm business owners in Jönköping County are men (Tillmar et al. 2022), despite evidence that farming is often a family affair shaped by gendered power relations, and characterised by gender segregated work and women doing unpaid farm work (Andersson 2014; Andersson and Lidestav 2014; Shortall 2015; Shortall and Marangudakis 2022).

Whilst the image analysis conveys some inclusivity, in depicting women, young people and the elderly, as well as apparently ‘foreign’, we find farmers are primarily constructed as middle-aged white men, as the front-page image of the Action Plan features three white, middle-aged men farmers dressed in stereotypical farmer’s clothes (overalls, peaked caps and wellingtons). Furthermore, the men farmers are placed close to machinery and a large barn, which builds on a common stereotypical imagination of men farmers (cf. Shortall and Marangudakis 2022).

### *Agricultural development and broadband access are the main policy problems*

We also find that in spite of its label as a rural development policy, an overarching policy problem is constructed as a (lack of) agricultural development, in terms of economic competitiveness and growth of farms as businesses. This reflects EU priorities (see Table 2), which are also represented in the Action Plan – in particular Priority 2. This problematisation echoes the neo-liberal discourse identified in the CAP and its focus on competitiveness, constructing rural development as a market matter (cf. Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020; Potter and Tilzey 2005).

Another strongly featured problem is represented as a lack of ICT infrastructure. In this problematisation, rural development is to be promoted through a ‘tech-fix’, by increasing access to high-speed broadband. The problem of access to broadband is represented as follows: ‘Access to broadband is of great importance for inhabitants, business life and access to different kinds of services in rural areas. The goal for this effort is to build high-speed broadband.’ (Action Plan 2017, 98) This is also the largest single budget item between 2014–2020, with an allocation of 44 per cent (EUR 17.6 million).

Whilst broadband is clearly important, it is not positioned as basic infrastructure to be provided by the Swedish state. Instead, the responsibility is placed on rural inhabitants. We question who is to be engaged in these ‘techno-fixing’ local-level constellations: Are perhaps elderly men and their rural networks activated through the focus on technology and construction

work, as other studies have found (cf. Arora-Jonsson 2017)? We suggest that a central gendered subject position in the Action Plan is elderly rural men, in addition to male farmers. In contrast, we find that much less attention is given to access to services such as local stores, postal services, care and health care, childcare, schools, and policing, even though these have been characterised by feminist researchers as important social infrastructure and pivotal to rural development (cf. Bock 2015; Bock and Shortall 2006).

### Alternative problematisations on gender inequality

We have analysed taken-for-granted constructions of gender in the Action Plan's policy problematisations, as well as their relations to the national and EU policies. In addition to researching the policy problems constructed per se, our approach opens up for alternative views of gender inequality as a problem in rural Jönköping county. We suggest that the problem of gender inequality could have been represented as a problem; indeed, it is, both in the SWOT, which preceded the formulation of the Action Plan, and in the pilot project by the women's advocacy NGO (cf. WINNET Sverige 2013), referred to earlier.

Even the Action Plan itself would have held a key to alternative problematisations of gender inequality had it actually made use of the 4R method in analysing and problematising the representation, resources, 'realia' (facts) and realisation of rural development in the county.

The SWOT does include some reasoning on gender-related issues under the heading 'Gender equality' but, similar to the Action Plan, it does not define gender equality, or the lack thereof, in any way. The issues discussed in relation to rural areas are not extensively elaborated, nor do they cite any previous studies or research. The SWOT does, however, include a somewhat broader discussion than the Action Plan, in terms of using concepts representing gender (in)equality and gender-related issues of subordination and marginalisation. These include the gender segregated labour market, the lack of gender equality, and reasoning on gender differences in terms of migration, firm ownership and education.

The broader discussion in the SWOT also goes beyond the sectoral emphasis on agriculture present in the Action Plan in deliberating on the development of rural areas in relation to gender differences. For example, according to the SWOT, women tend to migrate from rural areas to smaller towns in the county. One reason given is the lack of employment opportunities for women in rural areas, as the labour market is gender segregated. The SWOT argues that the gender segregated labour market needs to change in order for rural areas to become gender equal 'Gender equality in rural areas demands job opportunities in both women and men dominated sectors, but also that the gender segregated labour market is undone' (SWOT 2013, 15).

The SWOT also mentions that rural areas risk losing women and thereby their competence through migration. In relation to entrepreneurship, the SWOT says that 33 per cent of the businesses in the county are owned by women, and that 'businesses of various character and in new sectors are an important part of being able to develop rural areas' (SWOT 2013, 15).

The SWOT also includes a section called 'Horizontally', which includes the above-mentioned reasoning on gender (in)equality. In relation to this, the pilot project's recommendation is to 'Set aside specific means to work with gender equality as a horizontal goal' (WINNET Sverige 2013, 3), in order to secure the use of a gender equality perspective in the implementation of the RDP 2014–2020. While the concept of 'horizontal goals' is not used in the Action Plan, it is featured in the national RDP. Both the SWOT and the pilot project, discussed above appear to take the concept for granted, as it is not explained. We cautiously suggest that 'horizontal goals' signals an interest in mainstreaming gender into rural development, while we are aware of the critique against the concept and that it risks marginalising gender equality as a 'cloud on the horizon' (Forsberg 2005).

The pilot project makes a range of other recommendations by explicitly addressing gender inequality. This implies an alternative, broader spectrum of problematisations of gender inequalities than the one in the Action Plan. The Action Plan could have included or built on the pilot project and/or the SWOT, but this is not the case. We also find that previous studies and research on gender inequality in Jönköping County contain important knowledge which could have been used to problematise gender inequality in relation to rural development and farming in the Action Plan (e.g. Forsberg 1998; Pettersson 2004). In sum, had the Action Plan heeded some of the advice from the many forerunners, it could have included an informed definition, and set of actions to seek to come to terms with gender inequality. But it did not.

## Concluding discussion

The aim of this article has been to analyse how rural policy constructs problems related to gender inequality and gendered subjects in conjunction with a wider ambition to re-politicise and engage a post-structural feminist approach to rural development policy. While previous research on EU policies has focused on how EU policy has not produced gender mainstreaming (Bock 2015; Shortall 2015), we contribute new knowledge by focusing on policy formulation itself.

We conclude that gender inequality is largely left as unproblematic in relation to rural development, rather than being seen as a power issue intrinsic to the shaping of rural development (cf. Arora-Jonsson 2017; Arora-Jonsson and Leder 2021; Bock 2015; Bock and Shortall 2006). Gender inequality is

only problematised as women's and men's different terms for starting and developing businesses in agriculture and the manufacturing industry (cf. Prügl 2009; Shortall 2015), which mirrors the call of a neoliberal postfeminist discourse for individuals to start businesses and contribute to economic growth (cf. Berglund et al. 2018).

This limited problematisation is further narrowed down to a technical, administrative issue of application procedures for support (cf. Bock 2015; Shortall 2015), further perpetuating women (and youth and foreign-born) as underrepresented groups. Underrepresentation thus becomes a key factor in the policy, at the expense of subordination or marginalisation.

The proposed 'solution' to the underrepresentation of women and others is to prioritise them – paradoxically, not by affirmative action, but by attracting them through so-called gender equal and gender aware communication. This means that the gendered subject of women is barely constructed in the policy, as women are placed in the very narrow position of 'women uninterested in the rural policy and lacking the ability to take it on'. This simultaneously positions adult, Swedish-born men as the norm (cf. Convertino 2020) – a construction which is further reinforced by the centrality of targeting farmers, who are, in practice, men. The targeting of men is further enforced by the delimitation of rural development problematisations to agriculture and access to high-speed broadband. This places men in a rather narrow subject position and excludes men who are not farmers or broadband builders.

These constructions of problems and gendered subjects in rural policy, we conclude, reflect neoliberal notions of development, by seeking to promote economic growth through competitive businesses by supporting farmers and by building high-speed broadband access (cf. Arora-Jonsson and Leder 2021; Berglund et al. 2018). These conclusions contribute to research by observing that a neoliberal discourse – centred on economic competitiveness and using an economic vocabulary of market productivism – goes beyond the CAP and agriculture (cf. Erjavec, Erjavec, and Juvančič 2009; Erjavec and Erjavec 2020; Potter and Tilzey 2005), as it permeates the RDP and its implementation in Sweden. In addition, our conclusions indicate that a feminist perspective is key for realising – that and how – gendered constructions are at the centre of neoliberal policy discourse.

We also conclude that what could be expected from a policy addressing gender inequality in relation to rural development is not fulfilled and that by silencing gender inequality problems the policy effectively delimits important notions of both gender inequality and rural development. The policy thereby metaphorically turns an extensive rural landscape into a small tuft. In explicitly stating that it works for gender equality and gender awareness, while in reality it takes no action, the policy twists the concepts of gender mainstreaming and gender awareness, thus reinforcing the exclusion of gender inequality as unproblematic. This tendency to pay lip service to gender equality by using the 'right' vocabulary in the 'wrong' way co-opts the

feminist ambition and is in fact harmful to the feminist project. Our analysis thus finds a case of a neoliberal postfeminist discourse at play in the context of EU policy, indicating the pervasiveness of such discourse (cf. Berglund et al. 2018). Our results thus go beyond rural development policy in Jönköping county, Sweden, and the EU. Our reflection on alternative approaches to gender inequalities suggests that there are different, and broader, ways to discuss them. So, instead of completely overlooking extant research, it could have been used to make a broader spectrum of gender (in)equality problematisations and subject positions available for women and men. Considering the pilot project and the SWOT analysis alone – even if somewhat limited in their feminist approach – would have paved the way for wider problematisations and subject positions.

Our reflection on alternative approaches thereby represents a complement towards a transformative gender mainstreaming of rural policy, besides addressing land ownership (Shortall 2015) and emphasising farming as an occupation rather than a sector (Shortall and Marangudakis 2022). Feminist actions could also have meant including gender (in)equality in the EU priorities (see Table 2), setting targets and budgets in relation to gender (in)equalities, as well as allowing gender experts and women groups to influence policy. This, in turn, could have allowed a feminist transformative approach for working towards greater gender equality, exercising resistance towards the neoliberal postfeminist discourse. Taken the pervasive nature of neoliberal discourses in contemporary society these prospects, however, seem meagre (Berglund et al. 2018).

### *Future research*

As the new CAP 2023-27 includes gender equality and an increased participation of women in farming for the first time, researching the effects on Member States of the new CAP 2023-27, would be worthy in terms of their gendered character. As applying a feminist perspective is key for a fuller understanding of a neoliberal policy discourse, which has gendered constructions at its core we suggest future research to be informed by a gender approach. In-depth explorations of the policy processes producing the rural development problems would deepen the understanding of neoliberal discourse co-optation, the emergence of postfeminist discourses and the potential feminist resistance against such developments: e.g. on how feminists have engaged seeking to challenge policy and navigating neoliberal discourses.

### *Policy implications*

The findings in this article suggest that re-politicising gender by applying alternative problematisations is necessary in order to effectively change the rural development policy at the regional level – and deal with gender

inequalities – in Sweden and beyond. This would potentially benefit from national policy measures being separated from the CAP and RDP. This might imply cutting the links to the EU completely (through a 'Swexit'), or – perhaps more realistically – allowing the voices of the regional and local communities of various kinds, and of feminists, women-groups, women and men on the ground, to be heard, as well as allowing them to formulate policy problems and allocate budgets through bottom-up rather than top-down processes. Such feminist resistance may also have played out as collective feminist action for structural change, well beyond the production of economic growth through competitive businesses.

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