

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Always Gender but Not Only Gender: Operationalizing Intersectionality in Swedish Gender Equality Policy

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Abstract

Intersectionality is increasingly being operationalized as part of gender mainstreaming efforts across national and multilateral contexts. One prominent example can be located in Sweden's 2015 institutional commitment to centering future gender equality policy in an intersectional analysis. This article explores the complexities of institutionalizing intersectionality in Swedish gender equality policy processes, drawing on the situated insights of public sector gender experts and Afro-Swedish feminist activists and politicians. Key findings include the prevalence of additive interpretations of intersectionality that privilege gender, limitations in statistical practices, and uneven commitments to intersectional policymaking across different institutional contexts. Recommendations for enhancing intersectional policymaking include the incorporation of 'Equity Data' and qualitative insights through structured dialogues with intersectionally marginalized communities. Ultimately, this article emphasizes the necessity of centering the voices of both institutional insiders and intersectionally marginalized stakeholders to address the shortcomings of intersectional practice to enhance its transformative potential in Sweden.

Keywords: intersectionality; Sweden; gender equality; Afro-Swede; gender mainstreaming

Intersectionality¹ has been increasingly referenced as a grounding point in policy guidelines ranging from civil society organizations, universities, state actors, to intergovernmental institutions (Chow 2016; Christoffersen 2024; Hankivsky and Cormier 2010; Harpur, Szucs, and Willox 2022). One significant policy area where intersectionality has been mainstreamed is within gender

equality efforts across Europe. Sweden has been at the forefront of this effort, concretizing in a 2015 investigative government review of the national gender equality strategy that future policy should reflect an intersectional analysis (Government Offices of Sweden 2015). Up to this point, Sweden has maintained a strong reputation transnationally as an advanced state with respect to gender equality (Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk 2021; Sainsbury 2005; Sainsbury, Bergqvist, and Olsson Blandy 2007; Towns 2002). While Sweden's consistent ability to institutionalize feminism in policy and statecraft has long been recognized, scholarship has also pointed to tensions regarding patterns of social exclusion in Swedish society, particularly affecting intersectionally marginalized groups, calling into question Sweden's position as a trailblazing state feminist actor (Andersen, Hvenegård-Lassen, and Knoblock 2015; Borchorst and Siim 2008; McEachrane 2014; Reyes, Mulinari, and Molina 2002; Towns 2002; Vuolajärvi 2018). The apparent contradictions between Sweden's exceptional reputation with regards to gender equality and the simultaneous patterns of social exclusion that have been highlighted by activists and scholars adds further significance to Swedish efforts to institutionalize intersectionality.

Scholarship on intersectional policy practice in Sweden has focused on the role of gender experts (Freidenvall 2020), trade union bargaining (Erikson 2022), civic orientation for migrants (Bauer et al. 2023), and climate change policy (Singleton et al. 2021). However, while nearly a decade has passed since Sweden officially committed to grounding gender equality policy in an intersectional analysis, little scholarship has overarchingly traced the progress of these efforts in cross-national gender mainstreaming efforts. Relatedly, little scholarship has examined the broader reception of intersectional gender equality policy among stakeholders who represent intersectionally marginalized groups in Sweden. These gaps in the scholarship invite a deeper consideration of the possibilities, limitations, and perceptions enmeshed in attempts to operationalize intersectionality across Swedish institutions. Accordingly, the following questions will be taken up within the context of this article: How is intersectionality being operationalized within Swedish gender equality policy? What are the possibilities and limitations of operationalizing intersectionality in the Swedish institutional context? How do intersectionally marginalized groups in Sweden perceive the operationalization of intersectionality in policy processes?

Drawing from empirical data that includes semi-structured interviews with gender experts working in Sweden's public administration and Afro-Swedish feminist activists and politicians, survey responses from gender experts, and textual analysis of policy documents and government web pages, this article aims to trace how intersectionality is being operationalized in Swedish institutions responsible for advancing gender equality policy, and the evaluation of these efforts by Afro-Swedish feminists. The choice to draw on the knowledge and perceptions of these stakeholders is rooted in the understanding of gender experts as valuable sources of insider knowledge on the mechanics of policy implementation (Freidenvall 2020; Kunz and Prügl 2019). The choice to center Afro-Swedish perspectives is rooted in the understanding that the perceptions of Afro-Swedish feminists provide a valuable source of knowledge regarding the broader stakes of intersectional policy implementation, given intersectionality's origins in Black feminist theory coupled with the particular patterns of

intersectional marginalization that Swedes of African descent face. It should be noted that, given that I am engaging with the perspectives of Afro-Swedish feminists, the analysis in this article will at times closely, although not exclusively, assess the consideration of race/ethnicity in intersectional policy practice, which has a particular history of erasure and exclusion in the Swedish context. Putting these situated knowledges into conversation with one another, I argue that the operationalization of intersectionality in Swedish public sector institutions is variable and uneven, with limited impacts on the ground, due to a number of inherent structural challenges that are hindering the most transformative elements of intersectionality from being realized. Key influencing factors that will be examined include the prevalence of additive interpretations of intersectionality that ultimately privilege gender, the complexities surrounding the reliance of quantitative data to inform policy by Swedish institutions, and the tensions between depoliticized approaches to gender mainstreaming and the explicitly political dimensions of intersectional policy practice.

The article will start by engaging with literature on the operationalization of intersectionality in European policy processes, the development of Swedish state feminism, and the tensions around the inclusion and exclusion of intersectionally marginalized groups in Swedish political policy processes. I will then describe my data sample and the methodology I used in analyzing my empirical material. Subsequently, the article will divide my findings across three thematic sections. I will first analyze how intersectionality is being interpreted by government institutions such as the National Gender Equality Agency, and by public sector gender experts across Sweden. As I argue, these interpretations tend to be rooted in an additive understanding of intersectionality that privileges gender. The second theme will examine the role that statistical data plays in shaping intersectional policy practice across Swedish institutions, and more specifically the limitations in the data that gender experts are able to access, influenced by notions of individual privacy and a reticence to aggregate data beyond gender and age. The third theme will characterize the ways that intersectionality is stigmatized in many of the contexts I engaged with, while also touching on the ways that gender experts subversively work to enact intersectional policy despite institutional pushback. This section will also describe the ways that gender experts and Afro-Swedish feminist activists converge in the understanding that the future success of Swedish gender equality policies depends on the successful adoption of intersectionality across policymaking processes. I will then conclude with a discussion of the broader implications of my analysis, emphasizing the convergence of my findings with previous literature and the complexities around the role of quantitative data in intersectional policy practice. I will round off by proposing and describing two policy recommendations, namely, the institutional implementation of Equity-Data, and the greater usage of structured dialogue with intersectionally marginalized groups as a means of driving policy proposals.

Institutionalizing Intersectionality

Intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), drawing from an established lineage of Black feminist scholarship (Combahee River

Collective 1977, hooks 1984). A key tenet of intersectionality is located in the recognition that social inequalities are structural and inseparable from one another, calling attention to the ways that the intersections of inequalities shape access to power and resources, and furthermore the transformative political value of marginalized forms of knowledge.

More recently, Black feminist scholarship in Europe has forged Afropean approaches to intersectional theory and practice, underscoring the generative theoretical positioning of Black European perspectives as distinct from North American-centric theoretical traditions (Emejulu and Sobande 2019; Osei-Kofi and Tate 2023) calling attention to the importance of engaging with the situated knowledge of Black European feminist theorizing. In practice, intersectionality has been referenced as a guiding pillar in numerous European equality policy architectures, spanning from NGOs and CSOs (Boucher 2018; Christoffersen 2024; Christoffersen and Emejulu 2022; English 2018; Lépinard 2014) to multilateral (Lombardo and Verloo 2009; Maes and Debusscher 2024; Siim 2014), national (Begum and Sobolewska 2024; Bassel and Emejulu 2010; Folke, Freidenvall, and Rickne 2015; Krizsan, Skjeie, and Squires 2012; Siow 2023), and subnational (La Barbera, Espinosa-Fajardo, and Caravantes 2022; Rodó-Zárate 2020) policy processes.

A primary way that intersectionality has been institutionalized in Europe is through the consolidation of anti-discrimination policies. At the dawn of the 2010s, when several European states were in the process of updating their anti-discrimination policies to consider multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination, feminist scholars produced important analysis on the potential for intersectionality to be operationalized as a result of the reform wave that was sweeping across Europe (Kantola and Nousiainen 2009; Borchorst et al 2012). One of the most poignant analytical frameworks from this wave of scholarship came from Bassel and Emejulu's (2010) analysis of the challenges of operationalizing intersectionality in policy processes such as the single equality bill in the United Kingdom and in policies that aimed to balance *Laïcité* and anti-discrimination policy in France. While some scholars aimed to grapple with theorizing and recommending varying institutional approaches associated with bringing multiple anti-discrimination policies under a singular banner (Squires 2008; Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012), Bassel and Emejulu sought to trace the possibilities that existed for institutions to accommodate intersectional claims in the first place. In their analysis, they deploy the term "institutional space" to frame a consideration of the possibility for institutions to accommodate complex intersectional claims from marginalized groups, rather than focusing on the policy outcomes of recognizing intersectionality (Bassel and Emejulu 2010, 520). This focus on institutional architecture offers a framework to consider the possibilities and limitations for state institutions to effectively interpret and act upon intersectional claims. Emejulu and Bassel further develop the term "logic of separation" to describe how, contrary to the underlying intentions of intersectionality, institutions fail to accurately recognize intersectional claims through "a process of misrecognition, [where] intersecting axes of disadvantage are separated and in some cases even silenced" (Bassel and Emejulu 2010, 519). This institutional process of separating intersecting identities results in the limitation of institutional space that exists to recognize a wide range of subject

positions and power structures, creating hurdles for intersectionality marginalized groups to utilize state institutions to advance social justice claims.

Outside of anti-discrimination reforms, intersectionality has also been appropriated within gender mainstreaming efforts across Europe. To be sure, gender mainstreaming typically involves the successive incorporation of a gender equality perspective across all aspects of decision-making processes. The integration of intersectionality within gender mainstreaming encourages, at least on paper, a comprehensive engagement with intersecting and structural patterns of privilege and oppression across institutional policies and policy mechanisms that are aimed at advancing gender equality. But scholars of gender mainstreaming have pointed to ways that the institutionalization of gender equality in effect leads to its depoliticization (Sainsbury and Bergqvist 2009; Squires 2005; Mukhopadhyay 2014). Similar critiques have been leveled toward the institutionalization of intersectionality within gender mainstreaming, taking into particular consideration how intersectionality can become fundamentally misconstrued when adapted within gender mainstreaming processes.

Hunting and Hankivsky (2020) argue that while greater efforts to integrate intersectionality within gender mainstreaming frameworks can offer a chance at reframing them to include a wider variety of structural inequalities, they ultimately end up coopting and misrepresenting intersectionality. A significant issue is that “gender and gender inequality tend to be the a priori focus, which is antithetical to intersectionality” (Hunting and Hankivsky 2020, 432). Writing about the appropriation of intersectionality by white feminists in Europe, Christoffersen (2022, 268) further argues that European gender equality approaches have forwarded a “unitary concept of gender, based on a universalised white, middle-class, cisgender, non-disabled, heterosexual experience has been the privileged focal point of equality policy.” The move to incorporate intersectionality into gender equality policy machineries that have operated under these normative assumptions thus risks operationalizing intersectionality in additive ways that run contrary to its original intentions as articulated in Black feminist theory. Writing about the additive approaches to intersectionality operationalized in white led equality organizations in the UK, Christoffersen and Emejulu (2022, 644) further assert that “inequalities are conceptualized as being legitimately able to be added and subtracted at will”. This creates scenarios where intersectionality is conceptualized as a “pick and mix” (Christoffersen and Emejulu 2022, 648) where gender is privileged, and other categories of identity are sporadically incorporated into and removed from the framework. These critiques thus highlight the acute ways that intersectionality can mutate and be misapplied as it is operationalized in policy processes.

Swedish State Feminism

Moving to the development of Swedish state feminism, gender equality policies have been implemented dating back to the late 1960s (Sainsbury 2005; Sainsbury, Bergqvist, and Olsson Blandy 2007). Beginning with Social Democratic welfare reforms targeted at expanding parental leave, universal daycare, promoting political representation, and ending joint taxation, Sweden gradually

transitioned towards utilizing gender mainstreaming as its principal method for advancing gender equality in 1994 (Government of Sweden 1994). This change in strategy has brought forth the presence of gender experts across Sweden's public sector to assist with mainstreaming efforts and to monitor and implement localized efforts to promote gender equality. Each of Sweden's 21 administrative regions must have at least one gender expert according to Swedish law, and many of Sweden's 290 local municipalities also have personnel who are tasked with steering municipal mainstreaming efforts. In 2018, the National Gender Equality Agency (*Jämställdhetsmyndigheten*) was instituted with a mandate to coordinate the national gender equality strategy, produce supporting materials, and write yearly reports that would assess the progress towards the national gender equality goals. Sweden has thus developed multilevel institutional infrastructure to support gender mainstreaming efforts. The gender experts embedded in this infrastructure are potential allies and inhibitors of intersectional policy practice, and should be viewed as an important source of knowledge production on the nuances of operationalizing intersectionality, given their "insider" status in relation to institutional processes (Kunz and Prügl 2019). Departing from this understanding, the knowledge produced by Swedish gender experts via survey responses and interviews serves as an important empirical puzzle piece throughout this article.

Sweden has often been framed as a global leader when it comes to the advancement of gender equality. This longstanding praise was initiated by Helga Hernes (1987) when she coined the term "state feminism" to describe how Sweden and the Nordic countries at large possessed the necessary political conditions to act as "women friendly states." This praise continued on the international stage at the fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, where Sweden was declared as the country with the most gender equal political system in the world (Towns 2002). Sweden has continued to center feminism as a pillar of its statecraft, most recently when it launched the first-of-its-kind feminist foreign policy between 2014 and 2022, signaling a continued interest in maintaining an international profile that centers feminism. Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk (2021) argue that gender equality serves as an important aspect of Nordic forms of nation branding. The combination of a strong record on gender equality reforms, consistent international recognition, and the continued usage of feminism to inform domestic and foreign policy has given Sweden the reputation of being particularly advanced at gender equality, both in terms of its self-image and globally.

However, criticisms have been levied against the idea of Sweden as an exceptional nation when it comes to enacting gender equality. The academic introduction of intersectionality into Sweden by Diana Mulinari, Paulina de los Reyes, and Irene Molina (2002) was in part an effort to provide a framework to deconstruct hegemonic understandings of feminism in the Swedish context that often failed to consider how ethnicity, class, sexuality, and migration status influenced patterns of inclusion and exclusion in Swedish society. As de los Reyes and Mulinari (2020, 184) write more recently in their evaluation of why they felt the need to introduce intersectionality into the Swedish context:

The introduction of intersectionality responded thus not only to question differentiation processes that transcended binary perceptions of (gender)

power but also expressed political and epistemological challenges to hegemonic Swedish feminist knowledge production in a context of neoliberal transformations, global restructuring of borders and transnational migration.

The utility of intersectionality in Sweden has thus centered around its political and epistemic dimensions that open for alternative understandings of the way that feminist knowledge is operationalized and legitimized as processes of migration, globalization, and neoliberalization shape the Swedish welfare state.

Critiques of the limitations of Sweden's human rights profile have also emerged from Afro-Swedish scholars and activists, who have underscored how Black Swedes face heightened forms of discrimination while grappling with a societal reticence to discuss issues around race in the public sphere, in part since Sweden has been imagined as a homogeneously white space that is simultaneously color blind (McEachrane 2014, 2018; Miller 2017; Sawyer and Habel 2014). While Afro-Swedes are estimated to make up around 3% of Sweden's national population, they are subjected to disproportionate rates of hate crimes and discrimination in interactions with public institutions (Brottsförebyggande Rådet 2022). Previous scholarship has endeavored to describe and theorize Afro-Swedish modes of cultural and political organizing (Osei-Kofi 2024; Osei-Kofi, Licon, and Chávez 2018; Sawyer 2002). Scholarship that traces Afro-Swedish feminist knowledge production on Swedish gender equality policy is emerging (Bullock 2025b). I contend that given the intersectional forms of marginalization that Afro-Swedes face in Swedish society, they are well positioned to produce knowledge about the possibilities and limitations of Sweden's efforts to operationalize intersectionality. Departing from this understanding, this article will engage with the situated perspectives of Afro-Swedish feminist activists and politicians on their understanding of gender equality policy institutions, in order to illustrate the perceptions of Sweden's efforts to institutionalize intersectionality by stakeholders who stand to benefit from its successful implementation.

Data and Methodology²

The empirical data that informs this article is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted during 2023 in Sweden that sought to better understand which forms of feminist knowledge were granted access in influencing Swedish state feminism (Bullock 2025a). The research received ethical approval through the author's university research ethics board and from the national Swedish Ethics Review Authority. The participants have been given pseudonyms, and job titles and identifying information have been generalized to protect their anonymity. One aspect of the ethnography was directed at Swedish public sector gender experts and consisted of gathering survey data, conducting semi-structured interviews, analyzing government documents and webpages, and engaging in participant observation. Participants were recruited through an initial survey that was sent to all 290 municipalities, 21 regions, and the National Gender

Equality Agency that asked gender experts to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their institutional and national efforts to advance gender equality policy, along with questions asking the experts to define and elaborate on how they incorporated intersectional approaches into their work. In total, 64 responses were recorded. From these, participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews that aimed to provide more context and elaboration on the survey responses. Interview participants were selected based on a combination of their geographic location, their institutional context (national, regional, municipal), and the content of their survey responses. In total 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample was geographically and institutionally diverse, with responses and interviews being secured from across Sweden, in both rural and metropolitan contexts, and from municipal, regional, and national actors. Based on voluntary demographic information provided at the end of the survey, the sample was largely composed of women (95%) who framed themselves as white and ethnically Swedish (85%).

Further analysis was conducted on the National Gender Equality Agency website to examine how intersectionality was being defined and applied across webpages. Particular attention was paid to the social categories that were referenced in definitions of intersectionality, and if gender was privileged in official definitions of intersectionality. The interviews were transcribed, and coded alongside the survey responses and the government webpage definitions, to trace how gender experts were defining and interpreting intersectionality and how workers subsequently incorporated these understandings of intersectionality into various gender mainstreaming initiatives on the ground. Initial coding centered around capturing any instance where the word intersectionality, discrimination, or any reference to identity and hierarchies of power came up in the interviews/survey responses, with subsequent codes being added to frame when gender experts defined intersectionality, moments where they discussed the challenges of operationalizing intersectionality, and instances where they described how they enacted intersectional policy on the ground. These codes were analyzed for themes which subsequently inform the sections of this article.

A second aspect of the ethnographic research focused on understanding how self-identified Afro-Swedish feminist activists and politicians interpreted and perceived Swedish gender equality policies and institutions. The project consisted of gathering survey data, conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and engaging in participant observation. Participants were recruited through posters advertising the objectives of the research study that were placed in public spaces across major metropolitan areas in Sweden, and through email communication with civil society organizations representing Afro-Swedish interests, as well as through email communication with Afro-Swedish politicians. The survey, interview, and focus groups were all structured around tracing how Afro-Swedish feminists made sense of Swedish gender equality policymaking practices, including the operationalization of intersectionality across policy initiatives. This article will draw from the 15 semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the project. The sample ranged from grassroots activists to politicians who were largely located across metropolitan areas in Sweden. The interviews and focus group were transcribed and coded alongside the survey

responses to capture how Afro-Swedish feminists made sense of institutions and policy centered around gender equality, along with strengths and weaknesses associated with the way the Swedish state operationalized feminism through an intersectional lens.

Findings

Always Gender but not only Gender

Beginning with an analysis of how intersectionality is defined by Swedish institutions, an overview of the National Gender Equality Agency website reveals that intersectionality is defined in two primary ways. On the webpage, in a section that describes what gender equality is, a prominent subheader reads “Always gender but not only gender,” which goes on to inform that “there are large differences within the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ . The groups are not uniform” (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2021b). A number of social categories are listed as relevant in influencing the different lived experiences of men and women, including socioeconomic status, geographic location, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and ability. At the bottom of the webpage, one can find a link to an additional webpage that further explains intersectionality (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2021a). On this page, intersectionality is described as the consideration of multiple hierarchies of power when doing a policy analysis. A slightly different list of social categories, namely the seven legally protected grounds for discrimination (gender, gender identity/expression, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, age), is listed as relevant to consider when incorporating intersectionality into policy. The agency concludes the description by stating that it is essential to consider power in relationship to identity, with emphasis added to the necessity of considering how social structures influence life outcomes. Through these introductory explanations articulated on the National Gender Equality Agency website, there is discursive framing of intersectionality as a push to consider identity beyond gender, and particularly how various hierarchies of power further shape the social conditions for men and women. The identity categories referenced for consideration are principally drawn from anti-discrimination legislation, but are also expanded to include non-protected categories such as geographic location and socioeconomic status.

In practice, it was evident that the phrase “always gender but not only gender” held a particular resonance in the ways that public sector gender experts were defining intersectionality across my ethnographic interactions. In my survey of gender equality administrators, 45 out of 64 respondents (70.3%) responded affirmatively to a long-form question inquiring if they utilized an intersectional perspective in their work, and ‘always gender but not only gender’ would often begin or end the written survey responses. As one respondent indicated, “We like to emphasize that gender equality is central but not exclusive. Always gender but not only gender.” In further elaborating on how they put intersectionality into practice, several gender experts described how they would

consider one or two additional identity categories in addition to gender within the scope of their work. For example, one survey response read, “We think through ethnicity, disability, and gender in our strategic planning,” while another response read, “In my job we try to think about how women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable with respect to violence in the home.” As these responses demonstrate, the usage of “always gender but not only gender” as a way of structuring intersectional practice often involved the consideration of one or two additional identity categories in strategic planning and in policy enactments, while gender remained the privileged point of analysis.

Perhaps these interpretations and usages of intersectionality are unsurprising given that I was engaging with gender experts, but the consistent centering of gender best represented by the phrase ‘always gender but not only gender’, invokes a consideration of the additive nature of the way that this rhetoric influences intersectional practice across Sweden’s public sector. As scholars have argued, efforts to adapt intersectional approaches within gender mainstreaming result in inherently contradictory operationalizations of intersectionality given the centrality of gender, which is supplemented by the addition and subtraction of various other identity categories (Christoffersen 2022; Christoffersen and Emejulu 2022; Hunting and Hankivsky 2020). In the Swedish context, this can be seen in the frequent discursive usage of the phrase “always gender but not only gender,” which privileges gender by default, and also in practice where gender experts often described the addition and subtraction of variables such as ethnicity and disability to a central consideration of gender in their usage of intersectionality. To be sure, while the consideration of how additional hierarchies of power intersect with gender inequality is welcome, the additive manner in which it is done can reproduce an interpretation of intersectionality that is not rooted in the understanding of inequalities as inseparable from one another, thus limiting its transformative potential.

Aside from the additive interpretations of intersectionality, it also became apparent that there were varying degrees of commitment to the usage of intersectionality across the gender experts that I engaged with. Take, for example, these two survey responses, received in the same week, where public servants were asked if they utilized intersectionality and if so, to elaborate on how they put it into policy practice. The first reads,

Yes, I also try to encourage my coworkers in the municipality via steering documents and supporting materials to employ intersectional gender equality analyses in decision making processes. We also try to incorporate a gender equality perspective in other areas such as our rural development strategy, our work against segregation, or in our youth advocacy efforts.

While the second response reads,

Yes there is awareness around it, but we don’t do any active policy analyses from an established method.

These responses demonstrate that the usage of intersectionality differs between varying institutional contexts. Some gender experts actively work to ensure that an intersectional perspective comprehensively permeates policy analyses and strategies, while other experts attest to having a knowledge around intersectionality but not working actively to implement it in strategy or policy efforts. This suggests that while the Swedish state has made overt commitments towards grounding gender equality policy in an intersectional analysis, there is a variable and uneven usage of intersectionality across Swedish institutions, particularly at the regional and municipal levels.

In semi-structured interviews, it was clear that some gender experts were struggling with attempting to adopt an intersectional way of thinking. In my interview with Elina, a young, white, gender expert at the regional level, she went so far as to characterize thinking intersectionally as a personal quandary. As she described to me,

It (intersectionality) is always a dilemma. I think about it, absolutely, since I work with questions around equity along with gender equality. But it's hard to include all of the categories. It feels like we need to really focus on men and women right now, but we can't forget about the subgroups. I have to try to keep both perspectives in my head simultaneously.

Here, Elina chooses to differentiate intersectionality from gender equality, alluding to them as competing concepts while showing a clear preference for thinking about gender first and foremost, shown by her characterization of other identity categories as secondary to gender. When reviewing her quote, it seems that Elina is essentially articulating an understanding of intersectionality through the lens of "always gender but not only gender," demonstrating the way that institutional interpretations of intersectionality at times reproduce gender-first thinking that by extension positions intersectionality as a competitor to path-dependent working methods rather than a new approach to gender equality policy altogether.

The exclusionary impacts of gender-first approaches to gender equality policy were highlighted throughout my interviews with Afro-Swedish feminist activists. Describing her relationship to Swedish gender equality policy, Cleo, a queer Afro-Swedish feminist activist, noted,

I think that it gets expressed in ways that don't feel particularly relevant to my life... It's hard because I can see that if I was a different kind of woman, then I would probably look around and think that things are pretty rosy. I can understand why Swedish white, straight, middle-class women think they have it good, because I guess they do. So it's not that I think that it's all smack and no action at all, it's just that this action reaches a small proportion of Swedish women and other people.

As this quote reveals, the enactment of Swedish gender equality policy, even when it is presumably framed as intersectional, is often not viewed as relevant by those who face intersectional forms of marginalization. Cleo's analysis suggests, in line with previous scholarship (Christoffersen 2022), that the privileging of

gender in intersectional policy approaches ultimately results in a unitary concept of gender that is universalized as white, heterosexual, and middle class. This poses clear challenges for implementing gender equality policy that aims to rectify structural forms of intersectional marginalization.

Relating these themes through Bassel and Emejulu's (2010) conceptualization of institutional space, it is evident based on the surveyed empirical data that the institutional infrastructure that sustains gender equality policymaking in Sweden is limited both in terms of the very definition of intersectionality and the broad-ranging commitments to utilizing it in policy. These varied interpretations suggest that the rhetorical saliency of "always gender but not only gender" as a defining way of interpreting and putting intersectionality into policy practice opens for co-optive and additive approaches that, as Hunting and Hankivsky (2020) have argued, are counterintuitive to the origins of intersectionality. There is also evidence that "logics of separation" are at play in some of the usages of intersectionality in gender equality policy work, particularly given that a set standard of social factors based on anti-discrimination legislation are considered in an additive manner that separate identities from one another, while also limiting a consideration of a wider range of experiences that could also be useful to consider in institutional policy processes. While it is clear that there was a spectrum of interpretations and usages of intersectionality encountered across my ethnographic engagements, some that were quite comprehensive in working to integrate intersectionality across multiple aspects of institutional strategies and policies, there was an overall uneven adoption of intersectionality in gender equality policy. This uneven commitment suggests that a combination of factors, including institutional path dependence, and the relatively privileged position of gender administrators contribute to the resistance of intersectionality in Swedish institutions. Beyond the definition and commitment to using intersectionality, gender experts highlighted other institutional constraints that hindered their ability to operationalize intersectionality.

Statistical Hurdles

During my conversations with gender experts, the role that statistical data plays in informing institutional processes around gender equality policy was frequently touched upon. One of the priorities of Swedish gender mainstreaming has been to gender-disaggregate statistical data across government Institutions. The purpose of this practice is rooted in an understanding that gendered statistics will help expose different conditions that men and women live under which can help generate new policies to address such disparities. Throughout interviews, it was clear that quantitative data was used by many gender experts as a primary way to structure the findings of annual reports noting the progress of gender equality initiatives, and survey data was often used to gauge how men and women utilized and perceived public services. To name one concrete example, Birgitta, a white, middle-aged municipal gender expert, described during an interview how she had created a survey that aimed to assess which areas of the municipality felt unsafe for women and men to walk in during the evening. The findings of this survey were subsequently going to inform where

additional street lighting would be placed, and she noted that she wanted to take the perspectives of women into particular consideration. As this example demonstrates, across all levels of Sweden's public sector, quantitative data plays an important role in assessing the gendered impacts of policy while also guiding the direction of emerging policies.

However, despite the significant role that this data plays in gender equality policy, I noticed acute limitations in the data that was gathered, which I suggest influences the institutional space that exists for intersectionality to shape gender equality policymaking. In interviews, when I asked gender experts about the availability of statistical data that was disaggregated based on social factors outside of gender, I was often told that such data was not available. Many gender experts highlighted the right to privacy as an important principle that stood in tension with the potential to gather statistics beyond gender, while others brought up that privacy regulations such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) posed challenges to designing surveys that considered a broader range of variables. As Elina, who previously described intersectionality as a personal dilemma, explained to me,

We can look at gender divided statistics, but we aren't allowed to look at ethnicity, and we aren't allowed to look at disability statistics, and we aren't allowed to cross check anything. Maybe it has to be that way for the safety of the individual.

As the reasoning of this gender expert demonstrates, there are institutional limits around examining statistics aggregated based on ethnicity and disability, and there is no way to "cross-check" this data, which would potentially open for a more intersectional analysis, with the rationale being that individual privacy needed to be protected. This idea was expanded upon even further when Anette, a young, white, municipal gender expert, quipped to me when discussing the idea of intersectional statistical analysis, "I mean after a certain point if you add enough categories you would be able to tell who certain individuals are, which I don't think is fair." This statement further emphasizes the idea that an intersectional approach to disaggregating and analyzing statistical data was incompatible with the right to individual privacy.

Considering the challenges associated with data collection practices in Sweden and their relationship to institutionalizing intersectionality, two institutional norms are important to note. First, it turns out that gender administrators are correct in their assessment that they can't access statistics based on ethnicity and disability, given that official statistical disaggregations are legally mandated for only two of the seven protected classes for discrimination (age and gender). This means in effect that data that accounts for ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, and disability are not available nationally, and often are absent in regional and municipal institutions (Larsen 2018). Representatives from Sweden's National Statistics Agency (SCB) have also been on record stating that the gathering of statistics based on ethnicity violates paragraph 13 in the Swedish Personal Data Act (later enhanced by GDPR), which restricts the documentation of "sensitive personal details" (SVT Nyheter 2018a). The legal and

political norms that regulate statistical practices in Sweden are thus central in limiting the tools and methods available to gender experts as they attempt to operationalize intersectionality in their policy analyses.

Second, race as a legal and statistical category has been systematically phased out of Swedish laws and government institutions, instead being replaced by the term “ethnicity.” Starting in 2009 with the consolidation of Swedish anti-discrimination laws, the category of race was replaced by ethnicity, which has been characterized by the Swedish ombudsman against discrimination as referring to nationality, ethnicity, or skin color. Successively, the term race has continued to be removed from Swedish legal and government discourses (Yilmaz 2022). The underlying logic for this shift in Swedish policy has broad political support and can best be summed up in the words of former integration minister Erik Ullenhag, who justified the systematic government elimination of references to race by stating in 2014, “We want to fight racism, and the foundation of racism is a worldview that humanity is divided up into races. We don’t think laws should contain that word when we don’t think different races actually exist” (SVT Nyheter 2017). In essence, the logic that has often been forwarded in justification of the elimination of race is that the utilization of the term would foment and embolden racist depictions and understandings of people based on skin color, with the historical memory of state-sponsored eugenics programs across Sweden and Europe underpinning the understanding of racial categorizations as problematic.

These policy decisions have, however, been repeatedly criticized by international institutions such as the United Nations Committee against Racial Discrimination and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance for their damaging impacts on Sweden’s ability to combat structural racism (SVT Nyheter 2018b). The critiques of these governing bodies have centered around the Swedish state’s inability to combat the rise of far-right violence and hate crimes against racial minorities, in addition to highlighting the statistical challenges to tracking anti-Black discrimination due to the elimination of race in governance practices. This approach taken by the Swedish state towards the term race, and the critiques from international bodies, is important to consider when it comes to the institutionalization of intersectionality in Swedish gender equality work, especially given its origins in Black feminist theory.

Furthermore, race represents a global structure of domination rooted in Eurocentrism (Omi and Winant 1986; Quijano 2000) that has clear ramifications in the Swedish context (Osanami Törngren 2015; Wikström and HübINETTE 2021; McEachrane 2018; Mulinari and Neergaard 2017). The lack of critical engagement with race within Swedish institutions suggests acute limitations in the ability of intersectional policy practice to effectively challenge racial structures of domination.

The material ramifications of these dynamics were present throughout my discussions with Afro-Swedish feminist activists and politicians, where the failure to account for race in Swedish institutions was a recurring point of frustration. The single-issue focus on gender in many initiatives and efforts around gender equality resulted in many Afro-Swedish feminists perceiving that their situated experiences were rendered invisible in policy analyses. Delores, an Afro-Swedish feminist

activist with decades of experience working within and outside of Swedish government institutions, described the challenges of getting her colleagues to think more intersectionally as we talked over lunch at a busy cafe,

It was so difficult to negotiate about some things because they only wanted to see women and men, and we were constantly fighting for them to see for example, like when they talked about 'we want at least 40% women for it to be considered gender-balanced in different contexts', and we would say yeah, but which women and men are those... If you say, now we've got almost half and half in the parliament. Yeah, but which women are those and who do they represent?

As Delores emphasizes, the exclusive focus on gender, using representation in the Swedish parliament as an example, in evaluating gender equality benchmarks resulted in an inability for a deeper consideration of who those women and men actually were beyond their gender and by extension who they were representing.

Sirif, a feminist Afro-Swedish politician, further expanded on this idea in our interview, underscoring the color blindness attached to Swedish institutional thinking around gender equality, particularly in how statistics informed discussions on gender equality. As he described,

We know that men are sitting in the highest positions in society. The statistics show this, there's no hiding from it. But there is an utter refusal to gather statistics on race or ethnicity to see how that further influences societal disparities. That for me encapsulates the double standard with gender equality policies in Sweden. When we talk about gender equality between men and women, we need to understand which women and men we're talking about. What is often unsaid, but that we nonetheless know, is that these policies are geared towards white Swedish men and women. Nobody wants to have this discussion though.

Within Sirif's reasoning, he argues that the singular focus on gender in statistical practices, and by extension the inability to consider ethnicity/race, results in policies being geared toward the majority population (white, Swedish, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, middle class) by default, underscoring what he considers to be a double standard in the formation of policy and the discourses around gender equality since they purposely obfuscate further disparities based on intersectional factors. The perspectives of Delores and Sirif thus emphasize that the consequences of the current institutional statistical practices around gender equality implicitly result in an anti-intersectional discourse that privileges gender, actively rendering the lived experiences of Afro-Swedes and other marginalized groups invisible.

While the limitations of statistical practices were highlighted by both gender experts and Afro-Swedish feminist activists, there were some gender experts who I interviewed who were developing innovative strategies to account for a broader range of lived experiences in statistical data, in effect circumventing national restrictions by gathering data via proxy methods. One white municipal

gender expert, Stina, had a particularly poignant perspective on the hurdles associated with operationalizing intersectionality. Describing her institutional context, she explained, “It (intersectionality) is included in the overarching guidelines, but there are very few people who actually know what it means. There is no praxis around it,” indicating that there existed a surface-level understanding of intersectionality as a guideline, but very little knowledge around actually putting it to use in policy. To redress this gap, Stina had begun working from the ground up to implement statistical practices in municipal surveys that would illuminate dimensions of identity beyond gender. As she elaborated,

We are working to create methods to facilitate the gathering of data based on things like skin color. There has been very little work around structural racism in the municipality, which surprised me when I first started working here. That is something that I’m trying to successively integrate into my work.

Stina’s proactive efforts to combat structural racism through the voluntary gathering of data that attended to skin color set her apart from other gender experts I interviewed. Based on interviews, many gender experts seemed content to resign themselves to the impossibility of implementing such practices due to legal and privacy concerns.

Stina wasn’t the only gender expert who was thinking about proxy methods to capture a broader range of variables in their data collection. Other gender experts brought up, for example, the possibility of asking survey respondents about the languages they spoke at home, or their country of birth, as a proxy for gathering data on ethnicity/race, in addition to expanded options to indicate gender identity/expression and religious affiliation. These examples emphasize that while many institutional contexts are hindered by statistical data collection norms that are averse to accounting for data outside of age and gender, there are gender experts who are thinking innovatively about ways to incorporate proxy methods to support intersectional analyses in their work. Returning to evaluating the institutional space that exists for intersectionality to be operationalized in Swedish institutions, the sharply diverging approaches to utilizing statistical data to inform gender equality policy reveals the uneven and at times contradictory efforts to institutionalize intersectionality. In fact, Swedish legal regulations actively disincentivize the visualization of inequalities based on the intersections of sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, and disability, resulting in quantitative data that is not amenable to intersectional analyses. There were, however, some gender experts who were endeavoring to find alternative ways of gathering data based on skin color and home language, signaling that at least in some institutional contexts, efforts were underway to implement a more intersectional approach to data gathering and analysis.

Resistance and Alternatives

The final theme aims to relay how gender experts are navigating forms of institutional resistance to intersectionality, and furthermore the demands and

considerations that gender experts and Afro-Swedish activists alike are forwarding in considering the future of intersectionality as a structuring component of gender equality policymaking. While the very interpretation of intersectionality, and the restrictions on data collection underscore the sharp limitations of operationalizing intersectionality within Swedish institutional spaces, the narratives of resistance from gender experts and the desires for the future forwarded by Afro-Swedish feminists and gender experts highlight the political maneuvering that is currently at play that could subsequently shift how intersectionality is utilized in the future of Swedish gender equality policy.

While overt commitments from the Swedish state towards adopting an intersectional approach to gender equality policy have been clear since 2015, several gender experts I spoke with attested to localized tensions around the perception of intersectionality as a politicized theory, which was at times difficult to reconcile with the framing of public servants as politically neutral actors. As Felicia, a white regional gender expert, described,

I would say these topics are still considered to be politically charged. When you try to advance things like intersectionality, antiracism, and trans inclusion in gender equality administration, it's seen as partisan. You end up having to choose your battles... We need clearer goals when it comes to things like having trans inclusion in gender equality policies or considering that gender equality is connected to talking about the particular vulnerability of Black women. But I perceive that these topics are not seen as a fundamental part of democracy, but rather as partisanship. That prevents progress. We have a difficult navigation as public servants, we are politically neutral. But gender equality is not a neutral topic, and there is a tension in that.

This testimony reveals that even as national guidelines have been adopted around the incorporation of intersectional approaches to policy, gender experts are nonetheless forced to navigate tensions around the inherent political implications of utilizing intersectionality to inform policy. The core of these tensions lies in an understanding that public servants are supposed to act in a “politically neutral” manner, which Felicia views as incompatible with the scope of gender equality policy. Importantly, this testimony also underscores that as gender mainstreaming has largely depoliticized gender equality as a political project (Hunting and Hankivsky 2020; Mukhopadhyay 2014; Sainsbury and Bergqvist 2009; Squires 2005), particularly in Sweden (Alnebratt and Rönnblom 2016), the operationalization of intersectionality by gender experts can in effect serve as a tool of re-politicizing policy in ways that challenge the status quo.

One gender expert I interviewed met the institutional stigma she faced around intersectionality by finding subversive ways of incorporating it into steering documents in ways that would avoid scrutiny from her superiors. Birgitta, a white municipal gender equality worker, described at length her frustrations around the lack of willingness to incorporate intersectionality in her municipality. At one point during our interview, she characterized the backlash she had previously felt when she had tried to add language around

utilizing intersectionality in emerging policy initiatives as part of a steering document for her municipality. While she figured that it would be approved by her municipality due to the recent national commitment to intersectionality, she was surprised to find that there was a significant amount of sensitivity around incorporating it into official documents. In her words, her boss at the time, a white man, “became very nervous and worried and said ‘oh no, you know that word is politically charged, we can’t use it any which way,’” resulting in all references to intersectionality being removed from the document before it was eventually approved. This institutional blowback stunned her, especially since she viewed the utilization of intersectionality as the natural next step toward advancing gender equality.

By the time I was interviewing her, she was working under a different office in the same municipality and was actively in the process of drafting a steering document that would orient the direction of policy initiatives for 2024. She had taken her previous experience to heart, and told me that she was going to approach the process differently this time around. As she elaborated,

I am rethinking how I’m going about working intersectionality into steering documents that I am in charge of writing. Me and my colleague are working together now and thinking about the language that we can put in the document that dictates our programming and working methods for the next year. It likely won’t be referred to by name as intersectionality, but that is what it will be in practice. I’ve learned that you have to be subtle with this... but the most important thing is that the idea makes it in.

Birgitta’s initial experience of institutional backlash, and her subsequent efforts to subversively sneak intersectionality into policy documents, suggest that political maneuvering is occurring both in favor of and against the usage of intersectionality in Sweden’s public sector. In terms of considering the institutional space that exists for intersectionality to permeate gender equality policy, this example highlights the ways that some gender experts are carving out room for the inclusion of intersectional policy approaches, at times under the radar of their superiors.

Looking to the future, there was consensus among some gender experts and Afro-Swedish feminist activists that the future success of gender equality rested on the successful implementation of intersectionality across institutions and policy processes. In my survey of gender experts, in response to a long-form question over what needed to be improved with Swedish gender equality policy, 10 responses (22%) out of 45 total alluded to a better incorporation of intersectionality. In semi-structured interviews, 9 out of 19 gender experts (47%) made explicit reference to the acute need to improve the way intersectionality informed policy. In the words of Fatima, one of the few municipal gender experts I engaged with who had roots outside of Sweden,

It is often said that Sweden is one of the most gender equal countries, and in many ways that is true. But I think we have to be able to talk a little more about intersectionality. We have to understand that when we present a

policy evaluation or statistics that we need more variables than just two genders...We shouldn't be satisfied by the progress we have made.

While referencing the advanced reputation Sweden has gained through its long history of advancing gender equality, she framed intersectionality as a way of adding nuance and depth to continue igniting political advances.

Afro-Swedish feminists that I interviewed also made explicit references to the need for intersectionality to structure future iterations of gender equality policy. Of the 15 activists, 13 activists (86.6%) I spoke with made explicit demands around intersectional policy inclusion, highlighting that institutional efforts to operationalize intersectionality had not been noticed or felt by Afro-Swedish grassroots activists and politicians alike. Across my interviews, particular weight was placed on institutions needing to find ways to account for race/ethnicity, among other factors, in statistical data as a way of shedding light on structural disparities. Lisa, a grassroots activist I interviewed, framed the need for what she called "Equity- Data" (Jämlikhetsdata) as a matter of ensuring a functioning democracy. In essence, "Equity-Data" would involve the voluntary option to disclose one's ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and gender identity, to encourage institutions to capture multidimensional aspects of identity which could subsequently be used to design and implement intersectional policy. In our interview, Lisa explained the importance of adopting "Equity-Data" as a norm, "There are so many perspectives that are absent in public statistics. It is through statistical data analysis that we can inform our dialogue with those in power, it tells us about our society." It should be noted that this proposal would potentially reinforce additive approaches to intersectionality, by creating greater opportunities to track protected identity factors that could be added and subtracted from statistical analyses of policy. That said, while scholars have repeatedly argued that intersectional policy practice should not be reduced to the addition or subtraction of social categories, the recommendation of implementing Equity-Data by Afro-Swedish activists underscores that the potential risk of emboldening additive approaches to intersectional policy practice can at times be outweighed by the potential strategic value of shedding light on aspects of marginalization that are stigmatized to highlight in mainstream political discourse. Relatedly, many activists underscored that a continued unidimensional approach to gender equality policy would continue to render their perspectives invisible in institutional efforts to advance gender equality. As Flora, an Afro-Swedish feminist politician I engaged with, summarized,

The biggest improvement that is needed is that intersectionality must become the policy norm. We shouldn't even have to debate why different groups of people require different policy tools and resources to ensure that everyone's rights are secured. It's hard to challenge political structures, but we need structural change to achieve total freedom for everyone.

As the perspectives of gender experts and Afro-Swedish feminists lay bare, there is a strong push for future institutional engagements with gender equality to reflect a deeper engagement with intersectionality. While a range of

perspectives have been surveyed across this article, it is evident that significant convergences between the Afro-Swedish feminist activists and some gender experts I spoke with are located in an understanding that Swedish institutions have room to improve when institutionalizing intersectionality in policy.

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the possibilities, limitations, and tensions associated with institutionalizing intersectionality in Swedish gender equality policy processes. Drawing from the insider knowledge of gender experts and the knowledge produced by Afro-Swedish feminists, I argue that the institutional space that exists for intersectional policymaking in Sweden is limited by a number of challenges. The patchwork of empirical data that has supported this claim has shown the tendency for gender experts to privilege gender in additive interpretations of intersectionality, the limitations of data practices that leave little room to visualize inequalities outside of gender and age, along with uneven commitments to operationalizing intersectionality across various administrative contexts. Aspects of the analysis in this article complement previous research on intersectional policy practice in Europe. One significant point of analytical convergence is the prevalence of additive approaches to operationalizing intersectionality in gender mainstreaming, previously analyzed as a pan-European phenomenon (Christoffersen 2022; Hunting and Hankivsky 2020), within steering documents of the European Union (Maes and Debusscher 2024), in the UK equality NGO sector (Christoffersen 2024) and in the municipal politics of Madrid (La Barbera, Espinosa-Fajardo, and Caravantes 2022; La Barbera, Cassain, and Caravantes 2023). The prevalence of additive approaches even in the Swedish policy context further suggests that European efforts to engage in intersectional policy practice often lead to applications that are divorced from their theoretical origins. In the Swedish case, however, this article has shown that activist stakeholders are weighing the strategic value of a potentially additive approach to intersectionality, given the significant institutional impediments in accessing disaggregated data. The role of public servants in supporting and contesting institutional usages of intersectionality is also a central finding that aligns with insights from intersectional policy practice in Madrid (La Barbera, Espinosa-Fajardo, and Caravantes 2022) and Sweden (Freidenvall 2020). While the analysis shows that many Swedish gender experts are working innovatively to implement intersectional policy approaches, there is simultaneously a broad range of understandings and commitments to intersectionality across institutions, signifying that more precise and cohesive terminologies, working methods, and overall guidance are needed (Christoffersen 2024; La Barbera, Espinosa-Fajardo, and Caravantes 2022).

In terms of original contributions, this article provides one of the first analyses of a national commitment to centering an intersectional approach to gender equality policy, further expanding academic inquiry into the mechanics of intersectional policy practice. Sweden offers a novel case study, particularly given its positioning as an advanced state with respect to gender equality, the

trailblazing national commitment to institutionalizing intersectionality, and the robust institutional infrastructure that exists to advance gender mainstreaming. While the analysis centers on Sweden, the findings of this article are likely also pertinent to consider in other European contexts with strong equality architectures that simultaneously do not collect statistics on race or ethnicity, with France serving as one relevant example. The choice to center the knowledge and perceptions of both institutional insiders and activists representing intersectionally marginalized groups in evaluating intersectional policy practice is a methodological contribution that can serve as a potential blueprint for future scholarship. In terms of the analysis, the Swedish context exposes how arguments around personal data and statistics actively impede intersectional analyses. While not the first article to reference how data practices complicate intersectional policy approaches (Cavaghan 2020; La Barbera, Cassain, and Caravantes 2023; Siow and James 2024), the analysis offered in this article provides a deeper engagement of how national and transnational legal norms impede statistical disaggregations that could illuminate intersectional forms of marginalization. Given that only gender and age aggregations are officially mandated in Sweden, there are significant blind spots in visualizing how the intersections of sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, and disability shape hierarchies of power that could give a clearer picture of structural inequalities. The Swedish case also underscores how anxieties around acknowledging race as a structure of domination further impede efforts to operationalize intersectionality. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how the institutional space that exists for intersectional policy in Sweden is shaped by complex challenges, which have dire material consequences for intersectionally marginalized groups, as shown by the dialogue with Afro-Swedish feminist stakeholders.

Moving to potential solutions to the challenges articulated in this article, I offer two proposals for consideration. The first, drawing on suggestions from some Afro-Swedish feminist activists, is the incorporation of Equity-Data in government data collection efforts. Given the central role that quantitative data plays in the advancement of gender mainstreaming in Sweden, the implementation of Equity-Data would provide a legal avenue for the voluntary disclosure of identity factors, currently absent from institutional data analyses, that would provide at least a partial picture of structural inequalities that could inform subsequent intersectional policy interventions. While there is a significant chance that this data could be used in an additive manner, which scholars have argued runs contrary to the spirit of intersectionality, I assess that there is simultaneously a pragmatic and strategic value in creating pathways to visualize the material impacts of how intersecting hierarchies of domination influence access to power and resources in ways that currently don't exist in Sweden. Working methods could be explicitly established to help steer gender experts away from analyzing such data in an additive manner. In fact, the implementation of Equity-Data could serve as a springboard for activists and public servants to make informed demands that might lead to more transformative intersectional policies. To date, only two of eight parties in the Swedish parliament, the Left Party and the Green Party, have expressed support for implementing Equity-Data (SVT Nyheter 2024).

Second, given the identified complexities around the way that Swedish institutions manage and disaggregate quantitative data, I argue that a greater focus on foregrounding policies in qualitative data (perhaps in combination with Equity-Data) might be a more effective way of addressing the deficiencies of intersectional policy practice. This could, for example, involve the utilization of structured focus groups and forums of dialogue with civil society organizations representing intersectionally marginalized groups regarding their societal experiences and perceptions of policy efforts. Taking the experiences of these stakeholders seriously and using their insights to drive policy efforts would constitute a major shift in how policy is designed and implemented in Sweden. That said, intersectionality is grounded in a vision of transformative politics, and using qualitative methods to give intersectionally marginalized subjects a greater political say could lead to more organically intersectional approaches to solving socio-political issues. At least on a national level, there is evidence that some institutional actors are beginning to use focus groups as a means of better understanding the perspectives of vulnerable groups in relation to complex social challenges. For example, the National Gender Equality Agency initiated a focus group in 2023 that sought to better understand the challenges faced on the job market by foreign-born women in long-term unemployment (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2023). The insights of this work ultimately revealed a number of structural barriers to employment faced by these women that had been left unexplored in previous policy reports. Building on this example, Swedish institutions could successively begin to incorporate focus groups and forums of dialogue engaging with intersectionally marginalized actors to ensure that a greater range of perspectives are included in policy conversations. One institution in particular, NOD (The National Body for Dialogue between Government and Civil Society), could be a generative resource in facilitating the conditions for intersectional policy work moving forward. How qualitative data can inform institutional approaches to intersectional policy is a pressing topic that merits engagement in future research.

Looking forward, there is ample space for researchers, policymakers, and activists to continue to generate knowledge about the possibilities and limitations of putting intersectionality into practice in policy architectures across Sweden, Europe, and beyond. At its core, intersectionality invites deep political consideration of whose knowledge and lived experiences are accounted for, and research that is shaped by these considerations is encouraged to continue to contextualize the broader stakes behind the operationalization of intersectionality across political and social systems. As intersectionality continues to be mainstreamed across governance structures and civil society, activist and academic interventions will continue to be critical in shaping the transformative potential of future intersectional policy engagements. As this article has shown, the stakes of successfully institutionalizing it couldn't be higher.

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Notes

1. Drawing from the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2015), I conceptualize intersectionality as the recognition that social inequalities are structural, interlinked, and indivisible from one another, ultimately shaping individual and collective positions of marginalization and privilege.
2. It should be noted that there are differences in how my respondents used the term race and ethnicity. Gender experts almost exclusively used ethnicity, while Afro-Swedish participants often used race/ethnicity interchangeably. The differences in the use of these terms is reflected in the manuscript, where I have elected to use ethnicity when talking about institutional discourse, and race or race/ethnicity when talking about the perspectives of Afro-Swedish participants.

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