

From Policy Design to Behavioral Change: Applied Social Marketing and Gender Equality

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Abstract. *Gender equality has become a very important goal of public policy programs at multiple levels, leading to a significant adoption of legal strategies intended to promote equal opportunities. Despite this noticeable policy development, a constant gap remains between formal policy designs and the actual outcomes accomplished by public institutions. Existing strategies for implementing gender equality policies continue to count on legal and administrative tools, focusing on procedural alignment while giving little consideration to behavioral, cultural and institutional communication aspects. This paper claims that gender equality policies are not only working as administrative instruments but also as social interventions that plan on influencing norms, attitudes and everyday organizational practices. Building on applied social marketing theory, the study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design based on a structured synthesis of academic literature regarding gender equality policies, social marketing and public-sector governance. The paper addresses the research question of how applied social marketing can support the actual implementation of gender equality policies in public institutions. The main result in the study consists in the development of a conceptual framework that incorporates all the fundamental concepts of applied social marketing into the implementation stage of gender equality policies. Instead of emphasizing formal compliance, the framework reframes policy implementation as a process of behavioral change and institutional engagement. By doing so, the paper contributes to the literature on social innovation and public-sector impact, providing a theoretically based strategy for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of gender equality programs in public organizations.*

Keywords: gender equality, applied social marketing, public policy, behavioral change, social innovation.

Introduction

Gender equality has become a central goal of public policy agendas at the national, European and international levels, leading to the legislative structures, strategic action plans and institutional mechanisms aimed at reducing gender-based disparities, to be widely adopted in recent decades (Walby, 2005; Verloo, 2007; Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000). In particular, within the European Union, gender mainstreaming has been included as a primary plan in public governance systems with the hope of changing organizational procedures and policy (Mazey, 2000; Lombardo & Meier, 2006).

In spite of existent policy development, a large body of research, emphasize that there are still gaps between official policies and real results in public institutions (Moser & Moser, 2005; Meier & Celis, 2011). In addition, research literature reveals that gender equality policies have little impact on the actual organizational procedures, decision-making processes and power structures, suggesting that they are only partially, unevenly and symbolically implemented (Walby, 2005; Lombardo & Meier, 2006; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). However, further research suggests

that these implementation gaps cannot be only attributed to weaknesses in administrative capacity or legal structure. Instead, scholars highlight the importance of behavioral, cultural and discursive aspects of policy implementation, such as normative resistance, institutional opposition and how gender equality is framed within businesses (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Eveline, 2010; Verloo, 2013). Gender equality policies essentially seek to influence attitudes, behaviors and norms, yet they are rarely created and implemented using frameworks specifically focused on behavior change.

Considering this, the present study argues that applied social marketing might offer a relevant theoretical structure for rethinking how gender equality policies are implemented. Applied social marketing provides strategies that can be capable of addressing motivational and contextual barriers that restrict the efficacy of policies by focusing on audience segmentation, behavioral modification, value exchange and strategic communication (Grier & Bryant, 2005; Gurrieri et al., 2020). This paper addresses the following research question: How can applied social marketing support the implementation of gender equality policies in public institutions?

In order to address the research question, a qualitative conceptual research was designed, with the purpose to identify how primary concepts from applied social marketing can be translated into policy implementation practices in the field of gender equality. This research is structured as following: 1. Literature review – a focus on the main elements about gender equality and gender equality related policies; 2. Methodology – a description of research design; 3. Results and discussion – an overview of the main findings; 4. Conclusions – a summary of results.

Literature review

Gender equality policies and implementation challenges

Essential features of public governance systems, especially within the public institutions in Europe, are the policies that promote gender equality. These policies are usually thought of official public interventions that use organizational, administrative and legal measures to promote equal opportunities and reduce gender-based disparities (Walby, 2005; Verloo, 2007). One of the most well-known policy approaches, related to gender equality is gender mainstreaming, defined as the systematic integration of a gender perspective into all stages of policymaking and institutional practice (Mazey, 2000; Lombardo & Meier, 2006).

While gender mainstreaming has been broadly institutionalized, a big number of research highlight constant difficulties in its implementation. Studies frequently show that gender equality policies often times remain restricted to formal structures, producing limited impact on everyday organizational practices (Walby, 2005; Lombardo & Meier, 2006). This issue seems to keep coming up in later work, indicating that while gender equality policy can be talked about convincingly, the actual transformative impact of these policies can get lost in translation (Lombardo, Meier & Verloo, 2009). This difference between policy design and policy outcomes has been explained in terms of the dominance of legal and administrative approaches that focus on compliance rather than substantive change in organizations (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000).

Moreover, research has shown that in terms of implementing gender equality policies, there is often a tendency towards symbolic or performative practices. Public organizations may introduce equality policies, reporting mechanisms, or equality roles that are essentially aimed at demonstrating compliance with external expectations, rather than changing the underlying dynamics of power and gender (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007; Meier & Celis, 2011). Such an approach to compliance-oriented policy implementation reinforces the perception of gender equality as an administrative requirement rather than an institutional project. Inequality can also be

deeply embedded in institutions even in the presence of equality policy, leading to “hidden inequalities” in terms of day-to-day institutional routines (Agarwal, 2026).

Institutional resistance and organizational structures

In addition to procedural compliance, research has also emphasized the significance of institutional resistance and culture in shaping the outcomes of gender equality policies. Feminist institutionalism has emphasized that institutions are governed not only by formal rules and regulations but also by informal norms and practices that exert a powerful influence on institutional behavior (Krook & Mackay, 2011).

Research on the implementation of gender equality policies has shown that resistance to policy implementation is rarely obvious. Instead, it is often expressed through indifference, lack of engagement, or selective engagement, which reflects a deeper normative resistance to change in terms of gender roles, merit, and professional identity (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010; Lombardo, Meier & Verloo, 2009). Organizational culture acts as a mediator in this process. More recent thought suggests that this includes the importance of reflexivity in institutions in terms of internal learning in order to move away from symbolism in policy to actual change (Hervías & Radulovic, 2023). For example, informal understandings about leadership, work-life balance, and the division of labor by gender may shape the implementation of equality policies. When such understandings are left unchallenged, equality policies are less likely to result in behavioral change (Walby, 2005; Krook & Mackay, 2011).

Discursive framing and policy interpretation

An important body of literature examines the discursive aspects of gender equality policy implementation. From this viewpoint, policies are not assumed to have essential meanings; instead, meanings are shaped by dominant frames within certain contexts (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). The discursive approach to gender equality policy implementation emphasizes that the framing of gender equality is crucial in determining the legitimacy, relevance, and feasibility of policies. Research on the discursive politics of gender equality policies reveals the presence of various competing frames, such as equality as fairness, equality as efficiency, equality as compliance, etc. (Lombardo, Meier & Verloo, 2009; Dombos et al., 2012). Similar patterns emerge in the study of the internationalization of ideas in terms of gender mainstreaming in policy at the national level (True & Mintrom, 2001; Tuori, 2007). When the issue of gender equality is perceived mainly as a technical or legal issue, the more likely the institutional actor will behave instrumentally with regard to the issue.

The results of the discursive analysis also suggest that the opposition to the implementation of gender equality policies tends to be formulated in neutral or technical terms, which conceals the underlying normative disagreements (Verloo, 2013). Such opposition can be considered one of the most difficult to overcome via enforcement tools, since it refers to the level of meaning-making rather than non-compliance. These results highlight the significance of the communication process in the implementation of policy.

Behavioral perspectives on policy implementation

Recent studies on public policy have highlighted the significance of the behavioral approach in the study of public policy implementation. Unlike the traditional approach, which refers mainly to the rational compliance of the rules of public policy, the behavioral approach highlights the fact that the responses of the institutional actor to public policy are based on perceptions, incentives, and contextual constraints (Elgström, 2000; Bacchi, 2009). This approach can be considered highly

relevant to the field of gender equality, since the opposition to the implementation of gender equality policies tends to manifest itself as inertia or minimal compliance. This is in line with research that suggests that policy diffusion in terms of policy norms is something that is selectively adopted based on the incentives that are present in an institution or policy area (True & Mintrom, 2001).

The effectiveness of such behaviors also relies on the degree to which the implementation strategies address the motivations and constraints of those who are responsible for implementing the changes. This also shows the limitations of the compliance-based approach and the need to use implementation tools to influence behaviors.

Applied social marketing and the research gap

Social marketing, as a tool for influencing behaviors, has been defined as “an application of the science of marketing to influence voluntary behaviors that benefit individuals or society” (Grier & Bryant, 2005). The main principles of social marketing include being behavior-oriented, segmenting the target audience, value exchange, and the strategic use of the social marketing mix. These principles have been widely used in the implementation of public policies such as public health and environmental sustainability, where individual and collective behaviors are the main success factors (Gurrieri et al., 2020). Despite the clear relevance of the behavioral approach to the implementation of gender equality public policies, the literature shows a clear lack of integration of the theory of social marketing and the study of gender equality public policies. Social marketing in governance and equality policy is not widespread but is becoming more common in public health and sustainability policy (Gurrieri et al., 2020).

Existing studies on gender equality policies offer comprehensive diagnoses of the challenges in the implementation process, including symbolic compliance, institutional resistance, and discursive dilution, but rarely offer concrete mechanisms to overcome these challenges in the implementation process (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010; Verloo, 2013). This is also evident in the lack of conceptual models that explicitly link the objectives of gender equality policies with the mechanisms of changing behavior in the context of the institution. Applied social marketing is recognized as having a comprehensive framework to influence behavior; however, it has not been considered in the discussions on the implementation of gender-responsive public policies.

This study fills this gap by incorporating the principles of applied social marketing in the conceptual model for the implementation of gender equality policies in public institutions. In this regard, this study introduces a new perspective on the implementation of gender equality policies in the public sector.

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative conceptual research design with the objective of creating a framework for the implementation of gender equality policies in public institutions. The research process is based on the synthesis of literature from three main sources of academic literature: gender equality and gender mainstreaming policies, public sector governance and change, and applied social marketing theory. The sources were recognized and synthesized through a previous systematic review process, which ensured transparency and consistency in the selection of literature. Only peer-reviewed journals, books, and authoritative institutional literature were considered for the synthesis to ensure a strong theoretical basis for the research. Information was approached in a deductive way, in order to assure a top to bottom covering of the literature, with the purpose of developing the conceptual framework. (Saunders, et al., 2009).

The development of The Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework (BGEIF) was informed through a systematic review of 50 peer-reviewed academic papers, with a focus on gender equality policies in the European public institutions, within the period 2000-2025. The review was organized in 3 phases, according to Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), to assure comprehensiveness and reproducibility. In the first phase, searches were conducted across multiple databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, OpenAlex), using compilations of the following keywords strings: “Public policies and gender equality” + “social marketing”; “Gender equality in public policies” + “social marketing”; “Policy framing” + “gender equality” + “public institutions”; “Social marketing and gender equality”; “Gender equality and public institutions” + “social marketing”. The second phase referred to screening. During this phase, academic papers were included in this review based on the following criteria: they are related to gender equality in public policies/institutions and social marketing; they were published within the period 2000-2025; they were available in full-text and peer-reviewed formats. At the same time, during this phase some academic papers were excluded based on the following criteria: they were not available in full-text or peer-reviewed formats; they were not published within the period of 2000-2025; they were not related to gender equality in public policies/ institutions and social marketing. Also, duplicates were excluded. From the initial search, 50 articles were included in the final selection after filtering and screening of the studies in the third phase.

The analytical strategy used in this study is based on a comprehensive approach. First, the literature on gender equality policies has been examined in terms of common challenges in implementation, with particular attention to practices focused on institutional resistance, compliance and symbolic adoption. Second, the findings of behavioral policy and discursive policy studies have been examined in terms of their implications for understanding the role of the culture, norms and processes in policy results. Third, applied social marketing theory has been examined in order to collect elements that are particularly relevant to behavioral change in institutions.

Instead of using each of these literatures as separate pieces, this study has focused on areas of intersection, particularly in terms of challenges in implementation identified in the gender equality policy and elements of behavioral change identified in social marketing theory. This led to the identification of core analytical elements, such as behavioral orientation, audience segmentation, value exchange and implementation mechanisms that provide the basis for the proposed conceptual framework.

Considering the conceptual nature of the research, no empirical data collection, measurement and statistical analysis were performed. The methodological strength of the paper lies in its transparent selection of the literature, logical consistency of the analytical synthesis, and the logical consistency of the proposed framework. This is appropriate for the research aim and objective of the conceptual and theory-building nature of the research and consistent with traditional methods of conceptual and theoretical policy research.

Results and discussions

The primary outcome of this research is the creation of a conceptual framework on the implementation of gender equality policies using the social marketing approach. Rather than providing empirical research findings, the outcome of the analysis is the theory-building contribution to rethinking the implementation process of gender equality policies as an organized process of institutional engagement and behavioral change. This conceptual framework on the implementation of gender equality policies using the social marketing approach is named the

Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework (BGEIF) and incorporates the essential principles of applied social marketing within the implementation phase of gender equality policies.

The qualitative thematic synthesis of the selected studies was conducted in three stages:

Stage 1. Spotting recurring implementation challenges

From an extensive analysis of the literature, five recurring major challenges that emerged were:

- 1) Implementation gaps and mere symbolic compliance
- 2) Institutional and structural challenges
- 3) Challenges associated with implementing gender mainstreaming
- 4) Challenges associated with framing or discursive challenges
- 5) Challenges associated with active managerial involvement and political will

These five challenges were recurring and were coded as first-order analytical categories.

Stage 2. Building conceptual groups

The recurring themes were then grouped at a higher level of analysis in order to create the following groups.

Recurring theme	Conceptual cluster
Symbolic compliance	Behavioral implementation gap
Institutional barriers	Structural resistance mechanisms
Gender mainstreaming difficulties	Operationalization deficits
Policy framing	Discursive mediation
Political will & managerial engagement	Motivational alignment

Grouping the recurring themes at this level of analysis revealed that the majority of the issues are not procedural or legalistic, but behavioral, cultural and motivational.

Step3. Linking it to applied social marketing

Finally, the implementation clusters were compared with key principles of the applied social marketing theory and a clear link was found:

Implementation problem identified	Social marketing principle
Symbolic compliance	Behavior orientation
Institutional heterogeneity	Audience segmentation
Normative resistance	Value exchange
Discursive dilution	Strategic framing
Perceived implementation burden	Cost reduction strategies

The BGEIF was developed by systematically aligning these identified implementation problems with behavior-change mechanisms capable of addressing them.

The Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework

The Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework was derived from the systematic synthesis described above and integrates recurring implementation challenges identified in the review with core principles of applied social marketing. It is thought of as a continuous and integral process that consists of four conceptual parts: (1) policy design context, (2) institutional audience segmentation, (3) applied social marketing mechanisms, and (4) behavioral and institutional outcomes. These four parts of the conceptual framework offer a structured approach to understanding the process by which gender equality policies can be taken beyond bare compliance to institutional change.

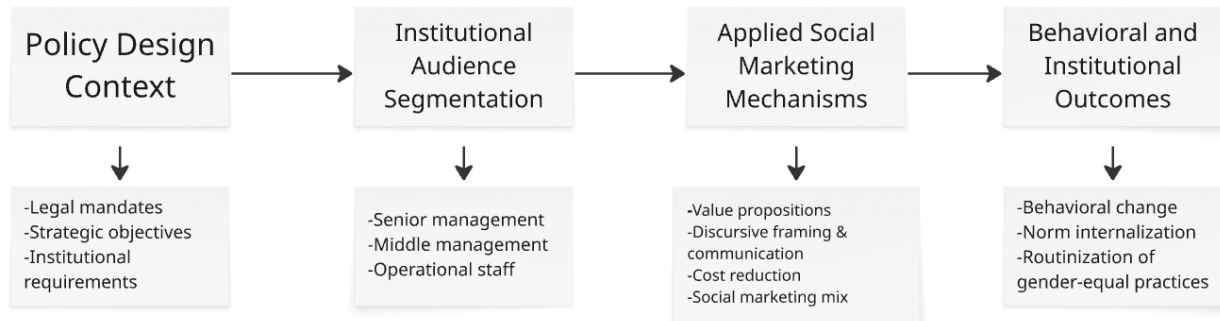


Figure 1. The Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework (BGEIF)

Source: Authors' own research contribution.

As it can be seen in the figure above (Figure 1), The Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework (BGEIF) considers the implementation of gender equality policies as a continuous and integral process. The process begins with the formal policy design context, moving through institutional audience segmentation and finally to the application of social marketing mechanisms. The integration of the value proposition, strategic framing, cost reduction and the social marketing mix in the BGEIF redefines the implementation process as a process of engagement rather than just formal compliance.

The first element of the framework refers to the *context of policy design* and involves the formal objectives, legal mandates, strategic action plans and institutional requirements related to gender equality policies. These aspects define the normative and regulatory basis of actions and the legitimacy of gender equality policies. Yet, as extensively described in the literature on the subject, the availability of legal and strategic frameworks does not ensure the successful implementation of policies and the consistent behavioral change in public institutions. Within the proposed framework, the policy design is not seen as a direct factor of policy outcomes, but rather as the context within which the strategies of policy implementation take place. In this way, instead of concentrating attention on the design of the policy, attention is drawn to the way in which the policy is implemented.

The second element of the suggested framework introduces the concept of *institutional audience segmentation* as a key mechanism of implementation. This concept is directly inspired by the applied social marketing theories that reject the assumption of a homogeneous public institution context of implementation. Rather, the suggested framework conceptualizes public institutions as entities composed of different groups. Segmenting these audiences also facilitates the development of implementation strategies that are adapted to the particular behavioral barriers and motivations that are associated with them. Moreover, by recognizing the differences in the perceived importance of gender equality between senior decision-makers, middle management and operational employees, the framework tries to remediate an important limitation of compliance-based approaches, which have standardized implementation tools that do not take into account audience differences.

The third component is the main analytical contribution of the framework and consists of the *applied social marketing mechanisms* that are intended to facilitate behavioral change within an institutional context. One of the key mechanisms is the development of value propositions that articulate gender equality in terms of its value to the institution and individuals. Such value propositions can be advanced through multiple pathways, among which education plays a particularly important part. Individuals from institutions might become part of the behavioral

change – a transformative process in which institutional values can be created through individual change and development. In this way, institutions can create mechanisms to avoid the so called “hidden inequalities” generated by gender inequality (Agarwal, 2026). Instead of focusing on gender equality as a legal or moral requirement, the framework encourages the development of value propositions that articulate the potential benefits of gender equality to the institution and individuals. This addresses one of the main areas of resistance to gender equality, which are the perceptions of irrelevance and cost.

Closely related to the use of value propositions is the use of discursive framing and communication strategies. In this regard, the framework encourages the use of discursive strategies to frame gender equality in terms of institutional effectiveness and social value, in order to reduce normative resistance.

The framework incorporates a range of mechanisms to reduce the perceived costs of behavioral change. These include the development of gender equality practices as part of existing practices, the development of supportive organizational environments and the minimization of the costs for implementation. Moreover, the framework draws on the social marketing mix and imagines the gender equality practices as the “product”, the costs of implementation as the “price”, institutional processes as the “place” and communication strategies as the “promotion”.

The fourth part of the framework deals with *implementation outcomes*. This is envisioned in behavioral and institutional rather than procedural terms. In this way, it goes beyond traditional outcomes such as policy development, reporting, or compliance. Rather, it focuses on outcomes such as changes in practice, the internalization of gender equality norms and the harmonization of gender-equal behaviors within organizational processes.

Each of the four components of the BGEIF has an explicit correspondence with the findings of the systematic review:

1. *Policy design context*: The systematic review provided evidence that legal and strategic frameworks exist but are inadequate. This provided support for placing policy design in the contextual rather than causally determinative category.
2. *Institutional audience segmentation*: Evidence of varying engagement levels of leadership, middle management and staff, provided support for incorporating segmentation as an integral component of the framework.
3. *Applied social marketing mechanisms*: Evidence of resistance, framing of conflicts and inertia in implementation, provided support for incorporating value prepositions, strategic framing, cost reduction and social marketing mix, as integral components of the framework.
4. *Behavioral and institutional outcomes*: Evidence of dissatisfaction with procedural outcomes, such as reports and legal frameworks provided support for redefining outcomes in behavioral and institutional terms.

From a discussion perspective, the Behavioral Gender Equality Implementation Framework advances current approaches to gender equality policy implementation by explicitly implementing dimensions that are often acknowledged but insufficiently theorized. While discursive approaches have offered lots of signs of resistance, symbolic compliance and normative immobility, they have rarely developed these ideas into concrete implementation approaches that focus on behavior change. Therefore, the incorporation of applied social marketing addresses these issues. It also provides a complementary role to legal and administrative instruments by seeking to ensure that the strategies for implementation are aligned with the behavioral objectives that are implied in gender equality policy. In this respect, the study contributes to the discussion on social innovation

in public governance, as it shows the potential for using tools from other policy areas to improve the effectiveness of gender equality policy.

Moreover, the study shows that the framework does not suggest that the approaches to implementation should be replaced by the new ones, rather reframes the issue of implementation as a process of engaging institutions. Therefore, it allows policymakers to address the issues of resistance, indifference and symbolic implementation, as an alternative to the use of the strategies that are based on enforcement.

The results of the study show the value of integrating the behavioral and communication perspectives in the implementation of gender equality policy and the framework tries to provide a coherent model that could be used in the development of future research and in the development of strategies for the implementation of gender equality policy in different public institutions.

What is being presented is not an abstract theoretical model but rather an integrative model grounded in systematic qualitative analysis and synthesis. The systematic review provided evidence that:

- There is an absence of effective gender equality policy implementation, which is often attributed to behavioral and cultural barriers.
- Implementation tools and strategies remain compliance-based and ineffective.
- There is limited guidance and support provided for implementing behavioral and institutional change.

The BGEIF is presented as an evidence-based response to address gaps that have been empirically verified. However, in order to clarify the practical relevance of the proposed framework, it is important to specify how its components can be operationalized within public institutions.

Operationalization of the framework

Although the BGEIF is conceptual in nature, its components can inform the development of practical implementation strategies in public institutions. In order to demonstrate the practicality of the framework, this section explains the operationalization of the components of BBGEIF in real-life contexts.

The first step in the practical application of the BGEIF is *translating the existing gender equality policy design into behavioral objectives*. Rather than accepting the policy design as a fixed outcome, the existing policy design can inform the development of behavior-oriented objectives in public institutions. For instance, instead of accepting “compliance with reporting requirements”, the objective can be translated into “enhancing inclusive decision-making in recruitment committees” or “ensuring balanced participation in leadership paths”.

The second operational phase in this model entails the *identification of unique internal audiences* within public institutions. Instead of viewing the implementation context as undifferentiated, institutions should attempt to group their actors in terms of their functions, decision-making authority, professional affiliation and level of influence in the achievement of gender equality. Few common internal audiences are: senior leadership and political decision-makers; middle management and department heads; human resource professional; employees and operational staff. Each of these groups will likely possess unique motivational factors, costs and levels of resistance. For example, the senior leadership group will likely be influenced by strategic framing in terms of performance and legitimacy, while operational staff will likely be more responsive to workload factors and fairness. In this regard, institutions should engage in a basic level of internal segmentation analysis to understand the unique opportunities and barriers

associated with each group. This operational phase translates the theoretical principle of segmentation, which has been borrowed from social marketing theory.

The third operational phase in this model entails *the crafting of special value propositions*. In the context of this model, the value exchange of gender equality is not just a moral imperative but also a means to achieve a unique exchange. In this regard, the model requires institutions to articulate the benefits associated with the adoption of gender equality. For example:

- For senior leadership and political decision makers: institutional reputation, innovation potential and compliance legitimacy;
- For middle management and department heads: team performance and conflict reduction;
- For employees: work-life balance, fairness and transparency in the workplace.

At the same time, costs associated with equality, such as time, administrative costs or perceived role loss, should also be taken into consideration. Examples of practical solutions might include the integration of equality considerations into existing workflows instead of creating parallel systems, improving reporting tools or providing managerial training to minimize uncertainty.

At this stage, the social marketing mix is applied in practice:

- Product: gender equality practices in the organization;
- Price: costs associated with the process;
- Place: areas where behaviors take place;
- Promotion: communication channels used by the institution.

Finally, the results of the implementation process should be *monitored from a behavioral perspective* rather than solely from a formal perspective. In other words, instead of measuring the formal adoption of equality plans or reports, institutions can track the following behavioral markers: changes in recruitment and promotion practices, participation rates in leadership training, perceptions of fairness and equality and changes in daily practices and norms. There is also the potential for using qualitative and quantitative methods, such as carrying out internal climate surveys, focus groups or diversity dashboards, in order to create feedback loops. In this way, there is further emphasis on the cyclical and dynamic nature of the framework.

The practical application of the BGIF is in how it seeks to change the approach from a compliance-oriented approach to implementing gender equality to a behavioral approach. It does this by building on existing legal instruments and creating mechanisms that address normative resistance, indifference and symbolism issues that have been extensively researched in the literature base but have not been sufficiently operationalized.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to address a persistent challenge in the field of gender equality policies by exploring the gap between the formal policy design and the effective implementation within public institutions. The research has demonstrated the fact that although the issue of gender equality has become an established concept in the making of public governance structures, the tools currently used for implementation, are still based mainly on the use of law. It has also been demonstrated that these tools have been insufficient for the implementation of the changes required for the achievement of the goals set by these policies.

The present research has taken the conceptual approach to the issue by arguing that gender equality policies are not just tools for the regulation of the governance structures but also tools for social intervention, with the aim of changing the attitudes and practices from these structures. It

has been demonstrated by the literature reviewed in this paper that the tools for implementation of these policies need to consider the behavioral aspects within the structures.

The main contribution of the study is the development of a conceptual framework that integrates the principles of applied social marketing with the implementation phase of gender equality policies. By highlighting behavioral orientation, audience segmentation, value exchange and implementation mechanisms, this framework rethinks policy implementation as an engagement with institutions and behavior change. This is an important departure from traditional policy implementation frameworks and ensures that policy implementation mechanisms are aligned with the unspoken behavioral goals embedded in gender equality policies.

From a theoretical point of view, this paper contributes to the body of literature on gender-responsive public policy by bringing together elements of feminist institutionalism, discursive policy analysis and applied social marketing. This study also adds to the policy implementation literature by introducing a behavior change-oriented lens that has been absent in gender equality policy studies. This is an important extension to the conceptual toolbox for policy implementation studies.

The proposed framework also has significant implications for social innovation, which, in turn, affects the public sector. The proposed framework indicates that the process of innovation in the governance of gender equality does not necessarily need to rely on new legal instruments, but rather on new ways of engaging institutional actors and transforming organizational practices. The tools offered by the field of applied social marketing are proven to be effective in enhancing institutional ownership, minimizing resistance and internalizing gender equality norms. Thus, for policymakers, this indicates a need to move away from the more traditional, inflexible and static approaches to policy implementation, which are often based on the application of the existing regulatory instruments.

In conclusion, the present paper indicates that the process of enhancing the effectiveness of gender equality policies should involve a redesigned process of policy implementation, which should take into account the behavioral and social aspects of the process. By offering a new perspective on the process of implementing gender equality policies, the present study, based on the tools of applied social marketing, offers a new perspective on the process of achieving gender equality, which might prove to be useful for both theoretical purposes, aiming to advance the field of gender equality and for the purposes of enhancing the process of gender equality in the public sector.

Limitations and future directions

It should be noted that there are a number of limitations to the present study, which should be acknowledged. First, the proposed framework, being a conceptual paper, has not been tested and its applicability might vary depending on the specific context. Moreover, the present paper has focused on the public sector, which raises the question of the applicability of the proposed framework to other organizational contexts.

In this regard, the limitations of the present paper indicate a number of promising avenues for further research, which might explore the application of the principles of applied social marketing, either implicitly or explicitly, during the process of implementing gender equality policies, aiming to assess their effects on organizational behavior. Further, the proposed framework might be compared with other tools for governance, aiming to explore their interaction with the tools of applied social marketing, aiming to enhance the process of gender equality.

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