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Institutions, Gendered Perceptions, and Frames of Meaning: Explaining Strategic Choices of Women MPs in Swedish Prostitution Policy

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ABSTRACT
Previous research has shown that politics is a highly gendered field and that male and female decision-makers hold different values and engage with different issues as well. Feminist institutionalism has provided important insights concerning how a given context creates the conditions for political behavior and outcomes in respect to gender. While both formal and informal institutions have been of interest in this field of research, less attention has been directed to the perceptions actors have of the institutional context. The starting point of this article is the constructivist notion that actors' behavior is mediated by their perceptions of the context, and it proposes that frame of meaning can be fruitfully used as an analytical concept for capturing gendered perceptions. The aim of the article is two-fold. The first is to develop the notion of gendered frame of meaning as an analytical concept. The second is to investigate the strategies used by female MPs in the case of Swedish prostitution policy in order to show how gendered frames of meaning guided their strategic choices. The added value of this approach is that it furthers our understanding of how the institutional context influences actors' behavior on the micro-level.

KEYWORDS
Feminist institutionalism; gendered perceptions; frame analysis; actors; strategies; prostitution; Sweden

Introduction
Why did female legislators in Sweden use two seemingly contradictory strategies in their struggle for client criminalization? For example, even though they used token men to legitimize the issue of prostitution and make it less “feminine,” they also formed cross-party women’s coalitions in which gender was a primary category. The present discussion argues in this regard that it is not sufficient to study institutions in themselves if we wish to fully understand actors’ strategic considerations from a feminist institutional perspective; we also need to examine the gendered perceptions that actors have of the institutional context.

Previous research has shown that politics is a highly gendered field, and numerous studies have revealed that male and female decision-makers hold different values and engage with different questions (Childs 2004; Lovenduski...
and Norris 2004; Osborn 2012; Swers 2005; Thomas 1991; Wängnerud 2009). Feminist institutionalism (FI), which combines the insights of feminist political science and new institutionalism, has recently emerged as an approach that is well suited for analyzing how a given context creates the conditions for political behavior and outcomes in respect to gender (see Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Mackay and Waylen 2014).

FI starts from the perspective that institutions are gendered and that formal regulations and procedures as well as informal norms and practices influence political behavior. Increased attention recently has been directed to the complexity of institutional arrangements and to how formal institutions often interact and overlap with informal institutions, producing gendered effects (Bjarnegård 2013; Chappell and Waylen 2013; Waylen 2014, 2017). Empirical studies have shown, for example, how informal networks and homosocial capital have a gendered impact on the recruitment of political candidates (Bjarnegård 2013), how ministerial recruitment is gendered by informal rules (Franceschet 2017), and how the capacity of gender equality policy machineries to act in the European Parliament is conditioned by informal rules and routines that at times can be used strategically to increase influence (Ahrens 2016).

Less attention has been directed, however, to how actors’ gendered perceptions of the institutional context influence their behavior and strategic choices. From a constructivist perspective, this article claims that it is not only the gendered institutional context in itself that influences actors’ political behavior but also how individual actors interpret and perceive the gendered context in which they find themselves (Hay 2006, 2011). Moreover, empirical gender research has displayed that perceptions are gendered and that they shape and influence behavior in gendered ways (Anzia and Berry 2011; Dittmar 2015; Fox and Lawless 2011). Waylen (2017) argues that a key task for future FI research is to continue to explore the “hidden life” of institutions, which involves more than simply their inputs and outputs. My position is that including gendered perceptions as an element of institutional analysis may be a fruitful way in which to do so. Furthermore, gendered perceptions are particularly important when assessing the gendered impact of informal institutions insofar as the latter allow for a significant range of interpretation.

This article has a twofold aim. The first is to develop the notion of gendered frame of meaning as an analytical concept that can be utilized to capture how actors’ gendered perceptions of the institutional context influence their behavior and choice of strategies on the micro-level. The second is to investigate the strategies used by female MPs in the case of Swedish prostitution policy in order to empirically demonstrate the usefulness of analyzing gendered perceptions for gaining an understanding of actors’ strategic choices. The analysis reveals that the apparently contradictory
strategies mentioned above in fact resided upon similar gendered perceptions of the institutional context.

The contribution of the approach presented in this article is that it furthers our understanding of the gendered effects of the institutional context, particularly by casting light on the latter’s dynamic relations with actors. It does so by introducing actors’ gendered perceptions as an analytical factor that fosters a deeper insight into how the institutional context shapes and influences the behavior of individual actors. However, this argument should be viewed as comprising a complementary rather than conflicting perspective in respect to feminist institutionalism in that it focuses upon the dynamic and contingent relations between actors and context. We should also keep in mind that although perceptions by their inherently individual nature are analytically distinct from the collective shared meaning that characterizes institutions, they may either coincide with or diverge from institutions in empirical terms.

**Feminist institutionalism and actors’ behavior**

Institutions are often defined as “the rules of the game” that structure political and social life (North 1990). They include *formal institutions* that are visible, codified, and officially sanctioned, such as criminal laws, regulations, and policy, as well as uncodified *informal institutions* that comprise socially shared and sanctioned regulations, such as norms and practices (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Ethington and McDonagh argue that the object of inquiry in institutional analysis is best described as a continuum between formal and informal institutions that “mov[es] from the study of such intangible phenomena as ideas, meanings, signifiers, beliefs, identities, attitudes, worldviews, discourses, and values to such tangible entities as states, consti1tutions, bureaucracies, churches, schools, armies, parties, and groups” (1995, 470). The key to distinguishing between an informal institution and other behavioral regularities is that it responds to an established rule or guideline that is backed up by some type of external sanction (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). By the self-regulating socially constructed mechanisms that enforce their operation, institutions thus differ from other social entities that are also constituted on the basis of shared meaning (Jepperson 1991). Azari and Smith’s maintain, for instance, that

> When behavior has no pattern, or when patterning derives from something other than a collective (“socially shared”) understanding of right behavior in a given setting (the “rules”), that behavior cannot be described as institutionalized (2012, 39).

For example, while sunbathing is commonly practiced in the summer, it is also perfectly fine to sit in the shadow, whereas deviation from the practice of using a swimsuit would generate sanctions.
Scholars working in the field of FI emphasize that both structure and agency are gendered (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010); that is, constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined with the daily culture or “logic” of institutions (Krook and Mackay 2011). Political institutions can thus be gendered not only in the sense that they involve rules about gender they can also produce gendered effects even when they appear to be gender-neutral (Gains and Lowndes 2014). Gender is an inherent part of the institution in the former case in that rules specify and allocate particular roles, actions, or benefits for women and men, while in the latter, apparently gender-neutral rules generate gendered effects by virtue of their interaction with institutions outside the political domain (Gains and Lowndes 2014). A third possibility noted by Gains and Lowndes is that gendered actors apply institutions in ways that have gendered effects. They observe in this regard that

[A]ctors are not institutional automatons. Actors design institutions and also interpret, apply and adapt rules on a day-to-day basis in the context of changing environments (Gains and Lowndes 2014, 529).

Since actors are gendered, their application of rules also readily becomes gendered, and we need to include agency in feminist institutional theorizing accordingly.

Constructivist research emphasizes that relations between actors and the institutional context are to be regarded as interactive or co-constitutive (Bacchi 2000; Gofas and Hay 2010; Hacking 1999; Hay 2006). Although institutions in themselves are clearly external to individuals, not only are they also internalized within people’s minds, actors are also reflectively aware of them to varying degrees (Giddens 1984; Hacking 1999; Larsson 2015; Schmidt 2010). Schmidt correctly remarks that institutions are “simultaneously structures and constructs internal to agents” (2008, 304). In the same vein Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) underscore the importance of understanding the dynamic character of the relations between gendered institutions and gendered actors both in respect to the latter’s strategic actions and in regard to the ways in which those actions become gendered and are thereby formed by their institutional contexts. Stated otherwise, although actors advocate new ideas, at times working strategically to change those that are dominant, they are also constrained by the institutional context and the ideas it embodies.

Against this background, Mackay and Waylen (2014) argue that we need to improve our understanding of feminist strategies from an institutional perspective. Furthermore, insofar as actors can either promote or resist institutional change, we need to introduce the role of gendered actors in order to explore the dynamics of gendered institutional change (Mackay and Waylen 2014). I argue that a fruitful way in which to advance research in this
area is to address actors’ gendered perceptions of the institutional context insofar as their actions are shaped not only by the institutional context but also by how they perceive and interpret that context (Gofas and Hay 2010; Hay 2006, 2011).

**Gendered perceptions**

Gofas and Hay (2010) maintain that actors utilize perceptions of the context when making strategic choices since they never know in a strictly objective manner what their actual material interests are. They explicitly state that “If we are to understand and explain behavior, we do not need to know what an actor’s material interests are, merely what they are perceived to be” (Gofas and Hay 2010, 25). That is to say that the interests and strategic choices of actors are not simply mechanical reflections of the institutional context, as has been assumed at times in rationalist perspectives. We must therefore know how actors themselves perceive their environment if we wish to fully understand their behavior; it is not enough to understand the institutional context as such. Even if we assume that political actors seek to attain various complex, contingent, and constantly changing goals, they do so within a context that favors certain strategies over others, and their perceptions of that context influence their strategic choices (Hay 2011). Indeed, actors’ conceptions of their surroundings may at times motivate them to act in ways that outsiders would interpret as irrational.

While it may be challenging to clearly distinguish between informal institutions, which are not officially coded or written down, and the ways in which actors perceive them, doing so is always relevant in analytical terms. We cannot assume that all actors perceive a given context in the same way. It is in fact not possible to know a priori how a given actor perceives her surroundings since many institutional configurations overlap and interact. In addition, various individual actors may well perceive one and the same institutional context in different ways because they occupy different social positions within it (Young 2002a). A well-established insight of feminist political science is that men and women tend to view things from different perspectives because of their different experiences and social positions (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2002b). Numerous studies have provided empirical support for this view (e.g., Childs 2004; Lovenduski and Norris 2004; Thomas 1991). As a result, insofar as many institutions are gendered and thus influence men and women in different ways, it is likely that men and women tend to perceive their institutional context differently, such as when norms that are perceived as problematic for many women may be less so for men in general. In addition, other social divisions besides gender, such as ethnicity, class, and age, can influence individuals’ perceptions in an analogous manner (Crenshaw 1989; McCall
2005; Yuval-Davis 2006). We therefore cannot assume that either women or men in general comprise coherent groups insofar as all individuals have unique social experiences.

Consequently, even if institutions produce collective effects insofar as they influence and shape the behavior of all actors and are thus reproduced, there is no deterministic relation between institutions and the behavior of individuals. Actors must navigate their institutional contexts, and elusive informal institutions in particular allow for a range of interpretations since actors can relate to them in a variety of ways. For example, while certain actors might act in accordance with the logic of appropriateness of a particular norm and thereby affirm it (March and Olsen 2008), others may adopt a more critical stance, work against it, or even break with it. On the methodological level, we should not simply focus on the general effects of institutions and their influence upon behavior but complement this type of investigation with an analysis of how individual actors’ gendered perceptions of a given context affect their actions.

Scholars in other fields have also pointed out that gendered perceptions are important for understanding how actors behave. For example, research on gender-biased political candidate recruitment has indicated that the gendered perceptions of potential candidates concerning their own qualifications influence their decisions to run for office to a significant degree (Fox and Lawless 2011; Lawless and Fox 2010). In addition to discrimination against women exercised by formal and informal institutions in candidate selection processes, the gendered perceptions of potential female candidates constitute a factor that has an impact upon their decisions of whether or not to run. Anzia and Berry’s study of female legislators in the United States Congress is another example of how gendered perceptions influence conduct. They argue that the ways in which female candidates view their own qualifications and perceive the discrimination within the electoral process, in addition to the actual discrimination against female candidates by voters, generate a sex-based selection bias that requires female candidates to work harder than men (Anzia and Berry 2011). Dittmar’s (2015) study of political campaigning from a gendered institutional perspective also reveals the importance of actors’ gendered perceptions. Her investigation of the constitutive relationship between individual actors and their institutional contexts reveals that actors’ strategies are based not only on the actual logic of given institutions but also on perceptions of gender that shape campaign decisions about how to portray candidates.

Insofar as the room for interpretation is greater for informal norms than it is for formal institutional rules, and although it is always important to take actors’ gendered perceptions into consideration, it is especially important in analysis of informal institutions. It should be noted that actors’ perceptions,
just as is the case with institutions, can obviously be gendered in a number of different ways with respect to both their consequences and how they are constructed.

Feminist institutionalism has made important contributions concerning how formal and informal institutions, as well as a combination of both, influence and shape behavior and actions in a gendered way. The focus until now, however, has been on the institutional context itself rather than on actors’ perceptions of that context. The present study aims to contribute to FI by making the claim that actors’ gendered perceptions is an issue that should also be taken into account when seeking to understand how the institutional context shapes and influences behavior. Gendered frames of meaning, which can be used to analyze how actors perceive their surroundings, is introduced as an analytical tool in the following section. This concept is a tool that complements and does not conflict with other feminist institutionalist perspectives.

**Frame analysis from an institutional perspective**

Frame analysis, which may be described in the simplest terms as a particular analytical approach within the constructivist tradition, spans a number of disciplines and various levels of analysis (for an overview see van Hulst and Yanow 2016; Björnehed and Erikson 2018). It complements feminist institutionalism by making it possible to focus on actors’ perceptions more explicitly. An important insight provided by frame analysis, which is relevant for the present study, is that actors internalize so-called frames of meaning in their efforts to make sense of the world around them (Goffman 1974). “Framing” may thus be defined as making sense of complex situations that are rich in information by means of selectivity and organization (Schön and Rein 1994). In addition, the frames that actors construct guide their actions insofar as they affect how actors perceive their room for maneuver in a given situation. Schön and Rein argue, for instance, that “it is the frames held by the actors that determine what they see as being in their interests” (1994, 29). And although frames are often tacit in character, actors can become aware of them to varying degrees and make use of rhetorical framing strategies in order to influence both other actors and outcomes (Schön and Rein 1994).

Frames are also performative in the sense that they generate results in reality, regardless of their “veracity,” when actors base their actions upon them. The performativity of gendered frames of meaning is an illustrative example of how actors “do gender” (Butler 2002, 34) at both individual and institutional levels. The actions and strategies of decision-makers are thus guided by their frame of meaning, which is often gendered, making them useful for understanding why actors behave in the ways they do from a gendered institutional perspective.
While institutional assumptions comprise a fundamental element of frame analysis, they are not analytically the most prominent. For example, Schön and Rein (1994) and Snow and Benford (2000) emphasize in this regard that frames are grounded in the institutions and discourses that sponsor them, whereby they are not free floating or purely cognitive constructs, but rather comprise how actors perceive their institutional context. Moreover, the relationships between frames and broader institutional contexts are interactive in character insofar as institutions are both maintained and changed by how actors affect the institutions around them through their actions.

In methodological terms, frame of meaning is an analytical concept that illustrates how individual actors perceive and interpret the context within which they find themselves. It thus complements such institutional perspectives as feminist institutionalism by providing a tool that is useful for uncovering how constructions of gender embedded in the institutional setting play out on the individual level and affect actors, their behavior, and their choice of strategies in gendered ways. In theoretical terms we may say that gendered institutions affect actors’ behavior both directly, through strong regulative functions that are tied to sanctions, such as penalties, fines or derision, and marginalization, and indirectly through actors’ own perceptions of the institutional context.

Frame analysis can be employed to capture frames on both the collective and individual levels (Snow et al. 1986). This is reflected in the fact that the core characteristics of a frame are often conceptualized in terms of a diagnosis, or problem identification; a prognosis, or a plan for action or solution; and strategies for carrying out that plan (Benford and Snow 2000). It should also be noted that constructions of gender are essential components of frames of meaning (Verloo and Lombardo 2007) and that they affect all other components, including how gender is constructed in both the problem representation and the proposed solution (Verloo and Lombardo 2007).

The empirical issue of interest at this venture is why female (and male) decision-makers in the political arena choose certain strategies and behave in certain ways. The argument presented addresses how actors perceive the political context and process—their frames of meaning concerning the political context—which is not to be confused with an analysis of policy frames, or frames in respect to a specific policy topic. van Hulst and Yanow (2016) maintain that although the various framings of the political process that actors construct properly constitute an important element of frame analysis, they are nonetheless typically overlooked. In contrast, the empirical investigation presented below focuses on how actors perceive the context in which they find themselves.

The empirical investigation below identifies the political strategies utilized by the female actors involved. The article then uses these strategies as a basis
for analyzing the frames that have motivated actors to select a given strategy in order to gain an understanding of their choices. The specific case analyzed concerns the current Swedish prostitution policy, particularly the strategies of the female actors in the political process that concluded in 1998 with the criminalization of the client. Ideas and norms concerning gender should be especially prominent and influential in respect to prostitution, not only because prostitution as such is a controversial issue that touches upon sexuality and power relations between men and women but also because it comprises a topic with which mainly women and women’s organizations have been engaged.

**Swedish prostitution policy**

In 1998 Sweden was the first country in the world to criminalize the purchase of sexual services, but not the sale of sex. Not only did this new policy regime problematize prostitution as gendered and hierarchical, the law was explicitly intended to make clear the gendered logic of prostitution and change society’s attitudes toward the practice (Govt. Bill 1997/98:55). Its proponents in parliament regarded it at the time as a feminist success, while some opponents described it as antifeminist in character (Erikson 2012). Several countries have introduced similar bans on buying sex during the last decade, with Norway and Iceland criminalizing the client and Finland adopting partial criminalization (Skilbrei and Holmström 2011).

Previous research has expressed disagreement concerning how to interpret the criminalization of the purchase of sexual services in respect to the broader Swedish discourse. For example, those who argue that the 1998 law comprises an extension of governmental control over sexuality (Kulick 2005) emphasize that the central element in the ban on the purchase of sexual services is the victimhood of women constructed as vulnerable (Bucken-Knapp, Schaffer, and Levin 2014; Dodillet 2009). Client criminalization has also been viewed as an expression of a new moralism disguised behind harm-based arguments (Persak 2014), while others interpret it as an example of a new course in Swedish gender-equality policies that advances the agenda in a direction that challenges established power relations between the sexes (Eduards 2007; Olsson 2006) and shifts the debate toward a greater focus on the buyer instead of the women engaged in prostitution (Svanström 2004).

The legislative change appears unusual within the Swedish context for a number of other reasons as well. First, the absence of a strong autonomous women’s movement in Sweden would seem to imply the lack of a foundation for such a radical change in an issue related to sexuality. Second, the law accords poorly with the Swedish gender discourse of redistributive justice and solidarity between the sexes. Finally, the parliament’s strong resistance to
criminalization during the 1970s and the early 1980s was an important factor working against the adoption of such a new policy (Erikson 2017). Both the social democrats and the non-socialist parties, who were in government during this period, held similar views concerning prostitution and accepted the established social approach until a social democratic government finally introduced client criminalization. Erikson’s analysis of the policy process that preceded the introduction of the ban on buying sexual services drew the conclusion that it resulted both from gradual ideational shifts in the problem framing of prostitution and from the strategic actions of female MPs (Erikson 2011b, 2012, 2017). In the latter regard Erikson reveals how the women’s sections of the political parties as well as individual women MPs played an important role in actively advocating client criminalization, using a variety of strategies in their efforts (Erikson 2011a, 2011b, 2012). For example, the women’s sections cooperated across party lines on several occasions, and out of 42 parliamentary motions between 1983 and 1998 that proposed client criminalization, no less than 35 were signed by a woman MP, with six being party motions that were signed by the Left Party’s (male) leader. The same pattern can be observed in the parliamentary debate, where women were more active than men.

Examining the strategies utilized by those female MPs who struggled for client criminalization provides a means for gaining an understanding of how their perceptions of the context influenced their choice of strategies. The empirical analysis concerning the new prostitution policy is based upon elite interviews conducted in 2008 with the 14 women from both socialist and non-socialist parties who were most actively engaged over a considerable period of time in the relevant policy process, writing parliamentary motions and participating in the debate. The interviews posed such questions as “How did you work to pursue the issue?” and “Which strategies did you use and why?” Because of the limitations associated with interviews conducted a significant period of time after the relevant events occurred, the robustness of the responses was confirmed by a process of triangulation among the interviews and through such other sources as parliamentary documents (motions, debate protocols, committee reports) and previous empirical research (Erikson 2011b, 2012). I have also drawn as necessary upon Erikson’s (2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2017) previous research of the policy process in order to situate the interviews.

I analyzed the transcribed interviews in a two-stage process for the purposes of this article—first charting the recurrent strategies through triangulation, then analyzing the underlying frames of meaning concerning these strategies in order to extract how the women in question perceived the parliamentary context that motivated a given strategy. Although the first was rather straightforward, identifying the actors’ gendered frames of meaning required an interpretative effort to reveal both what actors perceived as
problematic/obstacles within the political context in respect to their struggle for client criminalization (diagnosis), and what they viewed as possible actions and strategies in the given situation (prognosis). I also examined how these frames were gendered and finally, sought to explain why actors chose a specific course of action upon the basis of the frames of meaning I had identified. The institutional context of the parliament, particularly the at times elusive informal norms that shape and limit actors when they pursue gender issues, was of special interest in the study.

**Gendered strategies: gendered frames of meaning**

On the basis of the interviews, I identified four strategies that were repeatedly used by female actors. I will now describe these strategies in turn, analyze their underlying gendered frames of meaning, and discuss how gendered perceptions influenced actors’ choice of strategies.

**Making prostitution a general issue**

Women’s share of the seats in parliament gradually increased during the period of interest in the present study, crossing the thresholds of 20% in the 1970s, 30% in the 1980s, and 40% in the 1990s. Although women came to constitute a significant portion of the legislature, a number of female MPs described a strategy whereby they sought to obtain the support of “ordinary” people, that is, men and women who did not regard themselves as feminists. Several women from different parties reported that they deliberately spoke about prostitution in general terms, not primarily as a feminist problem or a women’s issue (interviews with Persson, Eriksson, and Henriksson). They also sought to avoid being labeled as feminists, emphasizing that both men and women were negatively affected by prostitution. This strategy was concerned with how to present the content of the issue. For example, Berith Eriksson stressed that “We tried to point out that this was not just a women’s issue and that men should take action, too” (Eriksson interview), while Chatrine Pålsson Ahlgren similarly maintained that “I’ve always tried to present this issue in terms of feeling pity for both parties” (Ahlgren interview).

Several of the MPs described how it was particularly fruitful to relate prostitution to the debate on HIV and promote client criminalization as a method for preventing the spread of the disease. The HIV issue provided an opportunity to link prostitution to a current phenomenon that was considered a threat to society and concerned everyone; it was an element of the actors’ perceived reality since the issue was discussed in the media and in the political context of the 1980s. This strategy was aimed at engaging people other than women and active feminists in the cause (interviews with Persson and Östh), with Persson stating that it was easier to gain support by
emphasizing the HIV risk than by convincing people with equality-based arguments (Persson interview).

Analyzing this strategy in greater detail reveals that the actors’ perceptions were influenced by gendered norms about how politics works, such as defining politics as largely a male domain and rendering women’s and feminist issues of questionable significance. The women consequently assumed that the question of prostitution would intimidate people, particularly men, and they formed their strategies accordingly. This point is exemplified by the way in which Margareta Persson, a member of the Social Democratic Party, described the work of women in support of client criminalization. Persson stated that

I also think that it was important that Social Democratic women advocated the issue. We were not a self-declared feminist organization at that time, class was more important than gender […]. Since feminism was then associated mainly with feminist groups and the issues they advocated, it acquired a certain label in the societal debate. It was important to a degree that those of us who were viewed as “almost normal” advocated the issue, at least from a tactical perspective (Persson interview).

The actors’ underlying frame of meaning thus constructed placing an emphasis upon a feminist or women’s perspective regarding a given issue as problematic in parliament insofar as doing so would supposedly have negative consequences and deter people from giving their support. The solution was to speak about the issue of prostitution in general terms, including relating it to such questions of a more general character as HIV. This gendered frame of meaning comprised the basis upon which the strategy was chosen.

The choice of strategies was limited for women MPs insofar as they planned their actions in accordance with this gendered frame and felt the need to avoid expressing a feminist or women’s perspective. But the extent to which a feminist analysis of prostitution was in fact downplayed is somewhat debatable since many of the women MPs who were engaged with the issue had done so precisely because they viewed it as problematic from a feminist point of view. In addition, introducing references to HIV involved potential pitfalls since it could be taken as meaning that women in prostitution were responsible for spreading the illness.

**Using men for legitimacy**

Another frequently used strategy that was related in part to the strategy of making prostitution a general issue involved utilizing male MPs to legitimize the demand for client criminalization (interviews with Segelström, Persson, André, Larsson, and Söder). This strategy was more concerned with who represented the issue, not its content. For example, the women’s section of
the Social Democratic Party convinced their male party leader to sign and present their motion for client criminalization at the beginning of the 1990s. Margareta Persson maintained this was purely tactical, stating that “If we wanted client criminalization to become a legitimate claim, we needed the help of influential old men” (Persson interview). Women in the Centre Party used the same strategy as well. The women’s section of the party, who advocated client criminalization, succeeded in obtaining the support of two senior men, Gunnar Björk and Bertil Fiskesjö, whom Karin Söder, a party leader and social minister in the 1980s, described as “highly respected people.” Fiskesjö had a PhD in political science and was vice-speaker of the parliament at the time, and while neither he nor Björk took the lead in the struggle for client criminalization, they both tacitly supported it. Söder maintained that their support decreased resistance to the issue within the party (Söder interview).

The same tactic was used at the Social Democratic Congress in the late 1990s, when the women’s section asked certain of their male colleagues to support the proposal for client criminalization, which had been initiated by the women’s section. Inger Segelström, who was head of the Social Democratic Party’s women’s section during the 1990s, stated that the majority of those who spoke at the time in support of the proposal were men (Segelström interview).

This strategy was based on the gendered perception that male support was important for legitimizing any given issue, particularly such a controversial and gendered issue as the demand for client criminalization. It is significant that although the men in question had influential positions and backgrounds, the female MPs emphasized that what was most important was the fact that they were men. They stated, for example, that since male support could legitimize the demand for client criminalization, they consequently needed men to present the issue. Indeed, being a man was regarded as more important for legitimizing the demand than having a PhD in political science, even if both were relevant. There is in fact no mention in the interviews that an MP with a PhD might garner greater support for client criminalization by virtue of being able to develop and effectively present more persuasive arguments.

The gendered frame of meaning expressed in this reasoning is similar to the first presented above. Its problem representation constructs the parliament as an arena in which it is difficult to advance issues strongly related to women’s concerns because such an association would delegitimize a given question for “ordinary” male and female MPs who did not regard themselves as feminists. The solution would thus involve using the support of male MPs to gain increased support for the issue. Furthermore, although the gendered frame of the first strategy above involved the content of a given policy proposal, and this frame clearly addressed who presented it, the two frames are similar in the sense that both express the
underlying perception that the institutional context of the parliament is permeated by gendered norms that determine the issues that are legitimate and the actors who are respected as politicians. An important consequence of this perception is that both feminist/gender issues as well as women politicians are delegitimized.

This second gendered frame of meaning also affected the choice of strategies of female MPs in a very concrete way insofar as it resulted in men receiving credit for work that women performed because women felt the need to use men to present their demands for client criminalization. It is interesting to note that the former social minister and party leader Karin Söder pointed to resistance within the party when she discussed the need to use male representatives in order to obtain support for the issue. She did not bring up the idea that her support for client criminalization, as a minister and party leader, could have been important for overcoming such internal party resistance (Söder interview).

**Women’s cooperation**

A third strategy that a number of the female MPs who were interviewed mentioned as having been important was cooperation among women across political party lines (interviews with Westerholm, Irhammar, Segelström, and Pettersson). Client criminalization was an issue that engaged women from across the political spectrum—from liberal, socialist, and conservative parties as well—and the women’s sections of the parties played important roles in the struggle for a new policy on prostitution (Erikson 2011b). Several respondents described how these women’s sections maintained contact with each other across ideological boundaries, supported each other, and worked together to push through their demand for client criminalization. At one point they authored a joint parliamentarian motion that was signed by women from six different political parties.

A number of the female MPs expressed the view when speaking about this strategy that men and women had different political interests and domains. For example, Rosa Östh of the Centre Party stated that “It was something like men against women; many of the men had no knowledge of the subject and no serious arguments” (Östh interview). Many of the respondents in fact remarked that men had apparently not thought much about the issue and saw no problem with prostitution. Inger Segelström noted in this regard that “The claim for client criminalization was a typical women’s issue; many men had not thought about it at all” (Segelström interview).

Several interviewees even regarded men’s and women’s interests as contradictory. Segelström, for one, was convinced that client criminalization would not have been possible before 1994, when the number of women representatives in parliament nearly equalled that of men for the first time.
She stated that “Since half of the MPs were women, the support of only a few men was enough. That insight gave us the strength needed to take up the issue” (Segelström interview). Her reasoning expresses the view that prostitution was a women’s concern and, as such, contrary to male interests. Ingbritt Irhammar expressed a similar view, observing that “I don’t think any man worked for this issue, and I don’t think there were many women who voted against it” (Irhammar interview).

The frame of meaning expressed in such reasoning was based upon perceptions that the political context was gendered to a great degree insofar as it was divided into what were regarded as women’s and men’s issues and domains. The problem that women MPs targeted with their strategies was that prostitution was viewed as an issue that pertained to the women’s domain and that men would not—and perhaps could not—understand it. This obstacle could be resolved only when women turned to other women. Coalitions across political party lines in support of women’s issues were therefore viewed as a solution, although it was also regarded as necessary to attempt to make men aware of the latter.

The gendered frame that regarded society as divided into men’s and women’s interests thus fostered cooperation among women across party lines, which had been made possible by women emphasizing that gender was a unifying factor. However, this contradicted to a certain degree the above mentioned strategy of making prostitution a more general issue. On the one hand, women parliamentarians endeavored to frame the demand for client criminalization in general terms in order to avoid a “feminist” label and gain the support of a greater number of people, particularly men. On the other, women emphasized that prostitution was a women’s issue so that they would be able to form women’s coalitions across political party lines. These two strategies, which run the obvious risk of working at cross purposes, reflect the paradox, well-known to feminist scholars that actors may have to choose between two somewhat contradictory feminist strategies. The one strategy emphasizes the particularity of being women in order to meet women’s needs and improve their situation, while the other stresses the similarity between men and women in order to remove discriminatory practices and abolish women as a category (Fraser 1995).

An analysis of the frames of meaning that underlay these strategies, however, makes it clear that even if the two strategies were in part contradictory, the frames associated with them were in fact similar and complementary. Both frames were based upon a perception that the political context was significantly gendered in the sense that there were, on the one hand, women’s issues and domains, and, on the other, men’s issues and domains that were more general in character and more political than the former. While prostitution belonged to the women’s domain, belonging to the men’s domain was more favorable for policy success. And although both strategies originated from similar
perceptions of the parliamentary arena, different actors chose to address the problem using different approaches. Consequently, while one group sought to make prostitution a more general issue that pertained to the male/general domain, a second took advantage of the specificity of the issue as a women’s concern in order to form female coalitions.

This finding sheds light on the usefulness of frames of meaning for gaining an understanding of the strategic choices that actors make, and it reveals that there is not a deterministic relation between the institutional context and actors’ strategies. It is also important to note that different strategies can nevertheless be counterproductive even if there is an underlying logic that explains why they coexist.

**Being liberal toward sex**

Margareta Persson, who maintained that emphasizing a liberal attitude toward sex in general was important for decoupling client criminalization from any moral standpoint, described a fourth strategy. Persson observed that “I [was] very careful not to appear anti-sex when taking about these issues. [...]. I constantly had to fight the perception that I was a little old lady in moral terms” (Persson interview). Persson argued that the fear of being regarded as hostile toward sex may in fact have been one reason why women hesitated to support client criminalization. Gunilla André, who agreed with this view, spoke of prostitution as a shameful issue for many women, and she also maintained that men exerted a significant influence over women in this regard (André interview).

The sex-liberal strategy is well illustrated by an incident that occurred when various views concerning pornography were discussed within the local Social Democratic Party women’s organization in Stockholm. Persson related in this regard that

> There was a discussion about prohibiting all pornography, but I argued that we should not support that position. Not only were there differences between different types of pornography, we also had to make a statement that was somewhat strategic [...]. It was important to show that we were not hostile towards sex in general (Persson interview).

Stated otherwise, one important reason for Persson’s position was her understanding that supporting a total ban on pornography would have been interpreted as adopting a moral position that was hostile to sex, and she wished to avoid precisely such an association.

A number of interviewees expressed the view that it was important to decouple prostitution from questions of morality and clarify that the reason why prostitution was being criticized was that it was an unequal gendered relation, not because it was an immoral form of sex (interviews with Persson,
Segelström, and André). Erikson’s analysis of the parliamentary debate also supported this finding (Erikson 2017). It is noteworthy that Persson regarded it as a problem that MPs from the Christian Democrats supported client criminalization because of moral considerations concerning prostitution, stating that “It was not easy to be associated with them.” A related line of argument against client criminalization was often found in the general European debate concerning prostitution, which regarded the demand both as paternalistic, and as an expression of Swedish morality. Women advocating client criminalization felt it necessary to highlight the fact that they were not opposed to sex in general and that the problem of prostitution was not moral in nature.

The gendered frame of meaning that shaped the sex-liberal strategy was based on the problem representation that parliament was a context within which feminists, including their critique of prostitution, were not taken seriously because they were associated with moral norms concerning sexuality. The solution to this problem would be for women to have a clearly positive orientation toward sex in general in order to decouple the issue from sexual norms, which would encourage men to take their critique more seriously.

This frame of meaning thus restricted behavior as well as the choice of strategies on the part of women MPs insofar as they had to modify both how they acted in private and how they spoke about prostitution and related issues in public. It was obvious from Persson’s interview that this gendered frame had had a strong effect upon her. She repeatedly remarked that even though she had changed her behavior in accordance with it, she nevertheless still had to endure men deriding both her and the issue of client criminalization as hostile to sex (Persson interview).

**Concluding remarks**

The present discussion focuses on utilizing frames of meaning as an analytical concept in order to investigate how the gendered perceptions of political actors concerning the institutional context influence their behavior and choice of strategies. Its usefulness has been demonstrated in respect to gaining an understanding of the strategic choices of female MPs who advocated for a new prostitution policy in Sweden involving client criminalization. Although previous research has made important contributions in respect to how gendered institutions affect political decision-making, little attention has been directed to how actors’ perceptions of the institutional context affect both men and women decision-makers on the micro-level.

From the general perspective of constructivist institutionalism, it is not sufficient to analyze how the institutional context in itself conditions actors’ behavior in a gendered way; it is also necessary to address how actors
perceive the context and how such perceptions are gendered, when we seek to understand their choice of actions.

Insofar as the political arena is a multifaceted and complex institutional configuration, it is debatable whether all actors perceive a given context in the same way. This insight is particularly important from a gender perspective. Since men and women have somewhat different experiences and positions within a given institutional setting, there are reasons to believe that their perceptions of the institutional context may differ as well. One interesting finding of the present study is that an important strategy used by female MPs was to express themselves on the question of prostitution in a way that would help gain the support of male MPs and “ordinary people,” whereby they both framed the issue in general, non-feminist terms and used men to present the issue. Their perception of the institutional context in parliament was that, one, it would be difficult to directly promote women’s and feminist issues, and, two, male spokespersons would heighten a given issue’s legitimacy. Such perceptions were generated by institutional configurations in the political sphere, particularly gendered norms in respect to the means and goals of political life.

In parallel with these two strategies, actors also used the conflicting strategy of emphasizing a women’s perspective to form coalitions between women from different political parties. Although this strategy initially seems to have derived from a different frame of meaning, the analysis demonstrates that it was in fact based upon a similar gendered perception of the context. However, while the first two strategies aimed to change the understanding of prostitution so that it would better accord with masculine norms for relevant and legitimate issues, the latter took advantage of the fact that prostitution was viewed as a women’s issue in order to find support among other women. While both sets of action were thus based upon similar representations of the problem, they tackled it in different ways.

Although this study does not allow for comparisons between men’s and women’s perceptions in this regard since no male MPs actively struggled for client criminalization, it would be interesting to investigate whether male and female MPs had similar perceptions of the same context. It is in fact plausible that men did not perceive these gendered norms at all since they are not negatively influenced by them in the same way as women. “Male” issues are usually considered to be general issues.

It would also be possible with the use of other data, such as observations or descriptive statistics concerning the success rate of a given issue, to compare the perceptions we have discussed above with “actual” practices. It may be the case that the perceptions of the context on the part of the women interviewed differed from observed practices. But regardless of any pertinent findings in this regard, it is important to emphasize that the types
of perceptions in question are performative; they have actual consequences since actors base their choice of strategies upon them.

The strategy of being liberal toward sex clearly demonstrates that all actors—even those of the same sex—do not perceive a given context in the same way. One female actor in particular regarded this as a very important strategy on the basis of an underlying frame of meaning whereby moral norms concerning sexuality were regarded as an obstacle to gaining support for a more gender-equal prostitution policy. In order to avoid being not taken seriously because she was supposedly against prostitution on moral grounds, she felt that she had to behave in a way that was liberal toward sex in general. But even though other actors also brought up the issue of morality, they did not formulate their primary strategies on the basis of this frame. Whether there were moral and sexual norms embedded in parliament at the time that were interpreted in different ways by different actors or whether only one particular actor perceived these norms to exert a strong influence constitutes an empirical question that cannot be answered in this study. What this study can demonstrate, however, is that it is important to understand the gendered frame of meaning of this specific actor if we wish to understand her choice of strategy.

This discussion illustrates how the present study contributes to furthering feminist institutionalism, both methodologically and analytically, in respect to the ways in which both the institutional context and gendered perceptions of that context influence actors’ behavior in a gendered way. Moreover, frames of meaning should be viewed as complementary to other existing frameworks as we seek to gain a broader understanding of how institutions in general, and informal institutions in particular, function on the level of actors. They can also provide insight into the dynamics of processes of gendered institutional change and into the gendered effects of institutional arrangements, which are mediated by gendered actors. And although it is beyond the context of the present article, future studies should combine an analysis of actors’ gendered perceptions with a more comprehensive empirical analysis that maps out a given collective institutional context, including gendered norms and practices in particular.

Notes on contributor

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