RESEARCH ARTICLE

How are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effects? Exploring the Scottish domestic abuse policy case

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The recent rise in anti-feminist resistance in Europe, occurring within a longer history of unravelling feminist policy gains, poses significant challenges for feminists. While scholars have closely examined resistance in cases characterised by significant equality backsliding, little is known about the contexts where anti-feminist actors are marginal and resistance is more inconspicuous. This article contributes to gender and politics scholarship, applying an integrated feminist institutionalist framework to a best-case scenario of progressive policymaking sustained over two decades: Scottish domestic abuse policymaking. Using documentary analysis and expert interviews, it traces the evolution of a form of anti-feminist resistance known as ‘whataboutery’ from 1998 to 2018. It argues that despite being positioned as losers in the debate, resistors have achieved considerable success in shaping policy trajectories and feminist strategies. The study sheds light on how feminist actors navigate real and anticipated threats to equality, illuminating the unintended consequences of women’s movements’ framing strategies.

Keywords anti-feminist resistance • feminist institutionalism • critical frame analysis • domestic abuse • Scotland • intersectionality

Key messages • Feminist institutionalism provides strong analytical tools to uncover manifestations of resistance.
• Resistors have opposed gender equality frames embedded within violence against women policy in Scotland.
• Resistance does not need to be widespread to have an effect on policy and feminist strategies.
• Feminists minimise intersectionality’s importance when addressing threats to gendered policy gains.

To cite this article: McCabe, L. (2024) How are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effects? Exploring the Scottish domestic abuse policy case, European Journal of Politics and Gender, XX(XX): 1–30, DOI: 10.1332/25151088Y2024D00000040
Introduction

In a time of rising anti-feminist backlash, a burgeoning body of literature has explored patterns of equality policy backsliding (Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018; Verloo, 2018). It is, however, beneficial to situate this analysis within a longer history of anti-feminist resistance, with feminist institutionalist scholars paying close attention to the unravelling of feminist policy gains over time (Chappell, 2006b; 2011; Mackay, 2014), including those seemingly well institutionalised. Thus, the current amalgamation of old and newer forms of resistance presents considerable challenges for feminists, creating a compelling moment to explore the particularities of resistance and its short- and longer-term policy effects. This work is salient given that our current grasp of the potential forms of resistance, while expanding, remains limited, particularly concerning its subtler manifestations (Ahrens, 2018). Ultimately, if we wish to ‘successfully counter backlash, we need to develop more specific understandings of what it entails’ (Piscopo and Walsh, 2020: 265).

Using domestic abuse/violence against women (VAWG) policy as a lens, this article contributes to gender and politics scholarship by surfacing and excavating mechanisms of anti-feminist resistance. VAWG policies are best described as ‘progressive’, as they strive to empower historically marginalised groups, particularly women, while challenging prevailing patriarchal social norms that perpetuate male domination (Htun and Weldon, 2012: 550). These progressive goals make such policies susceptible to opposition from anti-feminist activists (Dragiewicz, 2018; Krizsán and Popa, 2018). Recently, many gendered policy gains have come under attack, with notable hostility targeted towards feminist ideas embedded within the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe treaty to end VAWG (see Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021). Thus, the unremitting and embittered ‘process of political struggles and contestation’ (Htun and Weldon, 2018: 37) in framing domestic abuse/VAWG underscores its value in studying resistance.

This study responds to Celis and Lovenduski’s (2018) call for more research on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of resistance by asking: how are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effect on policy debates and feminist strategies? It proposes a fruitful framework to study resistance, synthesising critical frame analysis (CFA) with feminist institutionalism (FI). Bringing these literatures into conversation presents an opening to interrogate the ways in which intersecting institutional ‘logics of appropriateness’ (Chappell, 2006a) affect how actors resist feminist frames. It applies and advances an integrated FI framework to a best-case scenario of progressive policymaking sustained over two decades: Scottish domestic abuse policymaking. Studying ‘success’ cases is salient, as while we have a greater understanding of how anti-feminist resistance operates within polities with populist and far-right governments, we know little about the cases where resistors are politically marginal and therefore more inconspicuous (for exceptions, see Hansen, 2021; Engebretsen, 2022; Norocel and Paternotte, 2023).

Scotland presents a fascinating case to explore the intricate balance between feminist policy gains and resistance. From a feminist perspective, Scotland stands out as a trailblazer, with the devolution of power from the UK Parliament to the ‘newly’ established Scottish Parliament providing feminists opportunities to introduce gender equality claims from the start (Breitenbach and Mackay, 2001; Mackay et al, 2003).
In particular, Scotland’s transformative policy approaches to domestic abuse and distinctively feminist problem constructions have led to widespread acclamation from domestic abuse experts (Burman and Johnstone, 2015; Brooks-Hay et al, 2018). While the Scottish empirical story is predominately a tale of success, a closer examination unveils persistent resistance towards gendered framings of domestic abuse, marring current and future progress.

Drawing upon data from semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, I identify and trace the development of a form of anti-feminist resistance that I call ‘whataboutery’ over 20 years (1998–2018). Whataboutery is a logical fallacy and a bad-faith tactic whereby unreceptive and resistant actors interject with a different issue during a debate in order to disrupt and derail the discussion. Often taking the form of the question ‘What about the men?’, whataboutery has been identified as a common misogynistic strategy to oppose VAWG policy and practice in the UK (Eaton, 2018). Crucially, my conceptualisation and analyses of whataboutery do not encapsulate intra-feminist tensions surrounding the incorporation of men and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) survivors within existing gendered frameworks, as these efforts are underpinned by a feminist-informed analysis of violence. Notably, there has been some public attention towards whataboutery, particularly on social media (see Eaton, 2018; Murti, 2020), but academic research on this phenomenon is presently limited (for exceptions, see Shafer, 2004; Lombard, 2013). This article, therefore, builds upon activist and practitioner knowledge, providing a detailed account of the actors and institutions employing whataboutery in Scotland, its peaks and troughs over time, and the strategies employed by the government and women’s organisations to counteract it. I argue that while resisters are positioned as ‘losers’ within the debate (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010), they have achieved considerable success in shaping policy trajectories and feminist strategies, largely due to their persistence. I shed light on how feminist actors respond to real and anticipated threats, illuminating the unintended consequences of the movement’s framing strategies, including the difficulties in embracing intersectionality.

The article is structured as follows: first, it engages with scholarship advancing a CFA approach to study anti-feminist resistance before proposing an integrated FI approach to study hostility to feminist frames. Next, I summarise the Scottish case and the methodological approach employed. Finally, I present the key findings and indicate the empirical and theoretical implications of the study.

### Conceptualising anti-feminist resistance

While resistance to equality policies is not new, recent studies have demonstrated that it is growing and spreading across Europe, carrying harmful consequences and, arguably, some success (Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2018; 2019; Verloo, 2018). For the purpose of this article, I draw upon Verloo’s (2018: 6) definition of resistance as ‘any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and gender+ equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policymaking at any stage’.

To study the evolving landscape of resistance, feminists have advanced and applied a CFA approach (Verloo, 2007). CFA borrows insights from frame theory, social movement theory and public policy, particularly Carol Bacchi’s (2009) What’s the
Problem Represented to Be?. It points towards the different (sometimes conflicting) interpretations actors offer about policy problems, which, in turn, affect proposed solutions (Bacchi, 1999). It provides a valuable framework to examine the complex ways in which feminist actors are continually entangled in discursive struggles over the construction of policy problems (Verloo and Lombardo, 2007), giving way to points of resistance. This is especially true for equality policymaking, where gender and (in)equality are ‘essentially contested’ concepts (Squires, 1999: 54) that have always been marked by ‘slippery terms’ (Eveline and Bacchi, 2005: 497) and linked to other concepts, such as diversity (Jalusić, 2009). Indeed, the concept of gender can be ‘stretched’, ‘bent’, ‘shrunk’ and ‘fixed’ to reflect particular political agendas (Lombardo et al, 2009), including by those hostile to feminist politics.

Feminist scholars have demonstrated the benefits of a CFA approach in identifying sites of resistance within domestic abuse/VAWG policy (Krizsán and Popa, 2018; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021). Arguably, one of the most challenged aspects of domestic abuse policymaking is the framing of the problem as a manifestation of gender inequality (Krizsán and Popa, 2014; 2018). These gendered frames have been advocated by women’s movements, stemming from research and activism spanning decades. Most notably, Dobash and Dobash’s (1979) ground-breaking study revealed that women were more likely to be abused or killed by their husbands than strangers. Accordingly, feminists have attached a gendered meaning to the problem. Moreover, feminist empirical research consistently shows that domestic abuse is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women (Stark, 2007; Lombard and McMillan, 2013). Thus, feminist conceptualisations of domestic abuse firmly place violence within institutionalised power inequalities, emphasising that violence is systematic and rooted in patriarchal rule, which (re)produces the domination of women (hooks, 1984; Stark and Hester, 2019).

Yet, feminists are not always unified in their conceptualisations of the problem, leading to internal debates and tensions (for more detail on how these debates operate within the Scottish case, see McCabe, 2024). In particular, some feminists of colour have challenged the dominance of (single-axis) gendered frames, which largely serve heterosexual and cis-gender women while eliding the intersecting oppression of marginalised groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Chantler and Thiara, 2017). Simultaneously, others have problematised the limited feminist analyses of female violence against men (Renzetti, 1999; Westmarland and Burrell, 2023), which Carrington (2013) argues has opened a discursive space for anti-feminist ideologies of violence to flourish. Resultantly, some feminists have called for more inclusive and intersectional frames that account for the multidimensional dynamics of violence and diversity of experiences.

While these internal debates transpire, resistors oppose gendered frames by drawing upon counter-frames and evidence from family violence scholarship. In direct contrast to feminists, family violence theorists advance a gender-neutral framing of the problem, constructing violence as an outcome of everyday life and conflicts within the family (Gelles and Straus, 1979; Straus and Gelles, 1990; Straus et al, 1996; Dutton and Nicholls, 2005). One of the central tenets of this perspective is that the nature of violence is ‘symmetrical’, suggesting that women are as likely as men to perpetrate violence (Straus and Gelles, 1990; Straus et al, 1996), a claim strongly contested by feminists (Dobash and Dobash, 2004; Hester, 2013), including by those who centre the experiences of heterosexual men and
LGBTQ+ victims/survivors (Donovan and Hester, 2014; Westmarland and Burrell, 2023). Notably, there are fundamental ontological divergences between family violence and feminist perspectives of domestic abuse, often drawing upon opposing methodologies, analyses and evidence to construct the problem (Johnson, 2008). Consequently, it is a kind of policy dispute that cannot be reasoned or easily settled (see Schön and Rein, 1994).

Despite its conceptual strengths in revealing anti-feminist resistance in VAWG policymaking, researchers have mostly applied CFA to cases characterised by significant backsliding and state-sanctioned attacks on equality policies. However, evidence indicates that resistance is spreading to Southern and Northern Europe (Alonso and Lombardo, 2018; Hansen, 2021; Norocel and Pettersson, 2023), including in countries where gender equality forms a strong part of their national identity (Bergqvist et al, 2018; Engebretsen, 2022). Although a numerically small group drives anti-feminist politics within such cases, these views are increasingly being integrated into the mainstream critique of minority rights (Engebretsen, 2022: 188). This dynamic makes it crucial to recognise more latent manifestations of resistance within seemingly equal polities (Bergqvist et al, 2018: 117), helping us to draw more detailed conclusions about the forms that resistance may take.

Analyses of resistance would also benefit from situating hostility within its institutional and political contexts, given that ‘processes of contestation do not occur in a vacuum’ (Berthet, 2022: 680). An emerging body of research is beginning to integrate an institutionalist lens into their CFA approach, drawing upon FI (Lombardo and Forest, 2012; Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014; Gaweda, 2021). FI positions gender as a crucial dimension in the study of institutions, asserting that gender shapes and is shaped by institutions, signalling to actors what can (and cannot) be achieved (Kenny and Mackay, 2009; Krook and Mackay, 2011). FI has been increasingly interested in questions around resistance and its effects in obstructing positive gender change within institutions (Chappell, 2006a; 2014; Kenny, 2013; Mackay, 2014; Thomson, 2018). This work often takes a temporal approach to trace and explain the combination of change and continuity, as well as illuminating the (un)making of feminist gains within diverse institutional arenas. Recent explorations have highlighted how informal rules, norms and practices can be just as important as formal structures in forming mechanisms of resistance and explaining why equality policies may fail (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014; Waylen, 2014; Josefsson, 2020). In fact, even when an institution officially supports equality policies, the persistence of unequal informal gender norms can prompt individuals to resist change, thereby undermining its success (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014: 15).

Before outlining my FI framework, it is worthwhile to sketch out what comprises anti-feminist resistance within policymaking. Feminist scholars engaged with this question have offered numerous typologies, focusing on its explicit and implicit manifestations (for a more detailed breakdown, see Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014). Explicit resistance occurs when actors openly oppose feminist politics and equality policies, either through their actions or through their discourses (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014: 8). Examples of tactics of explicit resistance include rejecting gender equality, making references to ‘gender ideology’ (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021), discrediting feminist ideas (Roggeband, 2018), shrinking gender issues (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014) and disseminating anti-feminist discourses online (Holm, 2024). However, in some contexts, direct opposition to gender+ equality has become
unacceptable, somewhat taboo (Ahrens, 2018) or highly sanctioned (Josefsson, 2020), leading to more hidden tactics of resistance. These indirect or implicit resistant strategies may include non-implementation (Pincus, 2009), the non-allocation of resources (Cavaghan, 2017), inertia, evasion and degradation (Ahrens, 2018), and self-victimisation (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021).

I introduce the concept of ‘whataboutery’ to academic categorisations of resistance. This mechanism of resistance was identified ‘bottom-up’ by activists and practitioners in my study. Whataboutery is a pejorative tactic whereby actors respond to an argument by posing a different topic. Within equality policymaking, it often manifests in the counter-question ‘What about the men?’. Whataboutery is a misdirection tactic designed to disrupt and derail policy debates while questioning the legitimacy of gendered frames (see Schafer, 2004); thus, it is best understood as a bad-faith tactic. Crucially, this strategic framing manipulates pre-existing misunderstandings of and hesitancy towards feminist ideas. As will be empirically demonstrated, common claims by those utilising whataboutery include accusations of bias against men and assertions that men’s and women’s experiences of inequality are equivalent. Whataboutery can operate overtly, for example, in statements dismissing gender equality claims, but it can also be less obvious, meaning that it straddles active and implicit mechanisms of resistance.

While whataboutery emerged as the most common resistance tactic from the interviews, elsewhere, I have identified other manifestations of resistance within the Scottish case (McCabe, 2021). These include: (1) a broader resistance within public sector agencies to accept responsibility in addressing domestic abuse (which has largely diminished over time as domestic abuse has moved from the private to the public arena); and (2) a sanctioned ignorance towards gender equality frameworks, where ‘unknowledges’ are consciously produced (see Sullivan and Tuana, 2007: 1), explaining the prevalence of gender-blind approaches within ‘mainstream’ sectors and government departments.

Moreover, aligning with other scholars studying resistance and gender-based violence (Flood et al, 2021: 395), my use of the term ‘resistance’ is exclusively negative, denoting an opposition to domestic abuse policy initiatives and a rejection of feminism (see also Verloo, 2018). Hence, I do not conceptualise alternative claims advanced by feminists (including those inquiring about violence against men) or internal debates regarding the diagnosis of the problem as constituting a form of resistance. Unlike anti-feminist resistance, these alternative frames are rooted in a feminist understanding of violence and a dedication to inclusivity. Instead, I situate these internal disputes as ‘intramovement contestations’ (Benford, 1997). As the social movement literature indicates, the process of shaping shared understandings of policy problems is an inherently ‘contested process’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 625). Given that the problem of inequality is subject to multiple interpretations (Squires, 1999) and critical differences exist among feminist identities and claims, internal contestations are highly probable within women’s movements. While intramovement contestations and anti-feminist resistance are distinct from each other, their effects are somewhat interconnected, as they concurrently (re)shape framing strategies and policy development, as I will later demonstrate. Before presenting the evidence employed to identify whataboutery, the following section introduces an integrated framework that merges CFA and FI, asserting its utility in revealing latent resistance within progressive polities over time.
How are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effects?

Uncovering resistance through a feminist institutionalist approach

FI has primarily concentrated on hostility to gendered institutional (re)design (Kenny, 2013; Mackay, 2014; Chappell, 2016); however, scholars are beginning to use the approach to study resistance to feminist policy change (Erikson, 2017; Thomson, 2018). This article builds upon this nascent work by synthesising feminist discursive institutionalism (FDI) and feminist historical institutionalism (FHI) with CFA.

FDI takes the role of ideas and discourses seriously, positing that they help understand the gradual institutionalisation of new frames. With a strong focus on power, FDI highlights how hegemonic rules, norms and discourses can constrain discursive strategies for change and the adoption of (feminist) frames (Kulawik, 2009; Freidenvall and Krook, 2011). It underscores how actors, whether they support or oppose feminist ideas, find their aspirations compounded by the realities of operating within particular institutions (Hašková and Saxonberg, 2011). Indeed, actors may unintentionally uphold institutional discursive logics, with certain norms ‘slipping’ into their problem representations (Lombardo and Forest, 2012: 230). For example, actors influencing labour market policies may draw upon capitalistic norms to construct women’s employment, framing the problem as a market productivity issue rather than one of equality (Lombardo and Forest, 2012: 230). Additionally, FDI’s attentiveness to discursive struggles over meaning-making makes it invaluable in revealing the continual reworking of ideas and how frames are contested by different sets of actors (Kenny and Mackay, 2009; Kulawik, 2009).

While FDI offers insights into why some frames become codified while others do not, FHI helps to explain how and why change can be resisted through institutional logics. FHI’s emphasis on timing and sequencing offers valuable insights into how particular institutions and regimes arise and why it is often difficult to change them (Chappell, 2006a). This historical approach reminds us that opportunities for policy change should not be overstated, as past choices often hinder future developments through path-dependent structures (Pierson, 2004; Chappell, 2011). Once a particular path becomes established, self-reinforcing processes make reversal very difficult (Pierson, 2004), effectively meaning that ‘history is remembered’ (Pierson, 2000: 75) and any change is ‘bounded’ (Weir, 1992). It is particularly interesting to study resistance within ‘new’ institutions given the complex duality of change and continuity. On the one hand, feminist frames may be easier to incorporate at the beginning of an institution’s ‘life’ (Waylen, 2008), presenting opportunities for feminists to set the rules of the game. However, on the other hand, new institutions are ‘neither blank slates nor free-floating’ (Mackay, 2014: 567) but instead ‘nested’ within existing institutions (Chappell, 2011; Mackay, 2014). Using post-devolution Scotland as a case study, Fiona Mackay (2014: 550–1) advances the concept of ‘nested newness’, alerting us to the ways in which institutional and policy innovation can be actively resisted or passively neglected through a combination of ‘remembering the old’ and ‘forgetting the new’.

Alongside a pluralistic approach, my framework examines both the discursive content of frames and institutional framing processes (Erikson, 2017; Björnehed and Erikson, 2018). The framing process is best understood as a contest over meaning whereby actors compete for power, resources and influence to construct the diagnosis and prognosis of policy problems (Bacchi, 1999; Benford and Snow, 2000). Importantly, it brings together a complex web of actors, frames and institutions,
thereby unveiling discursive struggles. Actors draw upon particular policy frames to attach meaning to problems (Bacchi, 1999). At the same time, frames are not free-floating; they are grounded within institutions (Schön and Rein, 1994: 29), meaning that actors and their frames shape and are shaped by institutions (Erikson, 2019). A detailed examination of framing processes, therefore, helps to identify who the resistors are, the institutions they interact with, their strategies and their success in informing policy discourses (see Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014). Exploring processes over the long haul provides a more profound understanding of how resistors amend their strategies over space and time (Josefsson, 2020). For instance, as gendered ideas become increasingly institutionalised over time, they may begin ‘to regulate actors’ behaviour, thereby circumscribing their possibilities to resist’ (Josefsson, 2020: 54).

Exploring framing strategies also offers an in-depth elaboration of the ‘symbiotic relationship’ between women’s movements and counter-movements (Esacove, 2004: 72). Scholars have shown how the discursive strategies of feminist and resistant actors mutually influence each other like a ‘chain of action and reaction’ (Celis and Lovenduski, 2018: 153). Consequently, feminist strategies are ever-changing in order to counteract resistance (Aksoy, 2018; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2018; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018), leading to enabling and constraining effects. In some situations, resistance may provide an opening for women’s movements to reflect upon and refine their frames and strategies, bolstering their success (Schön and Rein, 1994). Conversely, it could force feminist actors to become reactive, compelling them to defend previous gains and steering the movement into ‘unintended or unwanted directions’ (Roggeband, 2018: 27).

The Scottish case

Scotland constitutes an ‘extreme case’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006) given its widespread recognition as a ‘paradise’ for equality policymaking (Khaleeli, 2014). Feminist mobilisation around constitutional change delivered remarkable gains for women by embedding gender equality reforms in the blueprints of new political institutions while opening up the political process to introduce new policy problems onto the agenda (Brown et al, 2002; Mackay, 2010). Above all, significant advancements have been made in domestic abuse policymaking. Feminist activists directed their efforts towards the new institutional structures facilitated by devolution (Mackay et al, 2003), prompting Scotland’s fast-track approach to addressing the problem. In 2000, only a year after the establishment of the new Scottish Parliament, Scotland became one of the first countries in the world to produce a national strategy on domestic abuse. The strategy was unique in its approach, employing a human rights and gendered framing of the problem. It states:

Domestic abuse is associated with broader gender inequality, and should be understood in its historical context, whereby societies have given greater status, wealth, influence, control and power to men. It is part of a range of behaviours constituting male abuse of this power, and is linked to other forms of male violence. (Scottish Executive, 2000: 6)

This policy construction contrasts with the gender-neutral and criminal justice definitions used in England and Wales. These divergences largely stem from variations
in the inclusion of women’s organisations in policymaking processes (Charles and Mackay, 2013), resulting in fewer opportunities to promote feminist perspectives in other parts of the UK, alongside asymmetrical devolution (Jeffery, 2009; Celis et al, 2013). Since the first national strategy, a feminist framing of the problem has been consistently incorporated into domestic abuse/VAWG policies, leading to Scotland’s approach being acclaimed as ‘world-leading’ (Brooks-Hay et al, 2018; Lombard and Whiting, 2018; Stark and Hester, 2019). With sustained official government backing, these constructions have rapidly become solidified as the intersubjective understanding of the problem (Hay, 2016), presenting institutionalised obstacles for those who oppose gendered frames (Josefsson, 2020).

While most scholars would agree that Scottish domestic abuse policymaking presents a ‘striking case’ of successful feminist mobilisation (Mackay, 2010: 370), some have also identified shortcomings in its applications in practice. Burman and Johnstone (2015: 52) found a lack of awareness of the links between domestic abuse and gender inequality ‘on the ground’, particularly in local authorities, which oversee the implementation of policies. Likewise, Mackay (2010: 383) has raised doubts over the prioritisation of domestic abuse across governmental departments, suggesting that it ‘has not yet been fully institutionalised or routinised as a mainstream policy area’. Gendered frames also remain open to contestation. Although Scotland has not experienced a comparable organised effort by men’s rights activists (MRAs) as seen in England and Wales (Orr et al, 2013; Lombard and Whiting, 2018), existing gains remain ‘fragile’ (Mackay, 2010). There have also been notable difficulties in meaningfully applying intersectionality in policy (Christoffersen and McCabe, 2024). While attempts have been made to represent the differences between and among survivors in policy, intersectionality has largely been omitted in favour of gendered frames. Notably, the national strategy, Equally Safe (Scottish Government, 2016), was republished in 2016, in part, due to the limited engagement with intersectionality. The prioritisation of gendered frames largely reflects the preferences of the most influential feminist actors and their responses to resistance (McCabe, 2024).

Methods

The single-case study employed a multi-method process-tracing approach, aligning with FI empirical traditions (Kenny, 2013; Thomson, 2019). I applied an interpretivist perspective to process tracing to examine points of resistance and their origins, usages and effects (see Venesson, 2008). I ‘place[d] politics in time’ (Pierson, 2000: 72), tracing policy frames and resistance over an extensive 20-year period. This time period began in 1998 with the Scottish Partnership on Domestic Abuse (SPDA), which formulated a definition of the problem, and concluded in 2018 with the enactment of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (see Figure 1). I gained multiple accounts through different data sources, namely documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews.

I began the research by conducting a CFA of policy documents, exploring the progression (and continuities) of policy debates, problem representations and solutions. Since the sampled policy documents (that is, national strategies and delivery plans) were produced by the Scottish government and public sector agencies, any underlying backlash – whether expressed or not during the process – was concealed in the final published versions, making it challenging to discern resistance solely from the documents. While I considered latent content within the text, the initial stage of
documentary analysis primarily explored how gendered frames were introduced, justified and maintained over time. I analysed the policy documents via NVivo using a set of standard questions and statements, drawing upon established CFA methodologies as the basis of analysis (Dombos et al, 2012; Verloo, 2016).

**Figure 1:** A timeline of Scottish domestic abuse policymaking and resistance from 1998 to 2018
To uncover mechanisms of resistance, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with experts in domestic abuse policymaking and service provision in Scotland, including representatives from the civil service, public sector, women’s organisations, academia and Parliament. I used an interview schedule as a guide, asking about diverse conceptualisations, debates and disputes in constructing the problem. The interviews offered insights into elements and debates that were not explicitly reported in formal documents, particularly individuals’ ‘attitudes, values, and beliefs’ (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002: 673; see also Tansey, 2007). Many of my respondents were responsible for formulating national, local or sectorial policies and could provide insights into the ‘way things are done’ within institutions (Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013), particularly how resistance was addressed throughout the policymaking process. On average, the interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, though some were significantly longer. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, except one where notes were used. The research conformed to the Social Policy Association’s ethical practices and was approved by the University of Edinburgh.

After identifying how anti-feminist resistance operated, I revisited the documents for any potential oversights. I also analysed additional and newer documents that explicitly addressed the anti-feminist claims highlighted in the interviews, namely the representation of men victims/survivors (that is, ‘What about the men?’). These documents included parliamentary debates, petitions and sectorial documents. Adopting a non-linear and dynamic research process was beneficial in producing robust findings and ensuring an in-depth process tracing.

A shortcoming of the project is that the majority of interviews were carried out with actors who identify as feminists rather than those who resist feminist frames. With the exception of a couple outspoken individuals, the majority of actors conceal their hostility in Scotland, making it difficult to identify and interview them. Thus, the discussions about resistance primarily reflect the viewpoint of those countering it.

Resisting feminist frames: ‘What about the men?’

The following empirical sections trace the evolution of whataboutery over two decades, covering the introduction and gradual institutionalisation of gendered policy frames, and emphasising when it has come into and out of view. It also details the strategies employed by the government and feminists to tackle resistance, along with their unintended consequences.

Introducing gendered frames

Scotland’s policy approaches to domestic abuse can be traced back to the SPDA. The SPDA was initiated by the Scottish Office, a former UK government department, tasked with agreeing on a definition of the problem for the first national strategy on domestic abuse. The group comprised government officials, public sector actors and, significantly, representatives from VAWG organisations, all of whom were invited by the government. The SPDA presented a lucrative opportunity for feminists to influence problem representations, inserting new feminist ideas during the ‘permissive stage’ of institutional design (Mackay, 2014: 549). In particular, it offered an opening for the VAWG movement to (re)introduce domestic abuse as an intrinsically gendered problem. Activists drew upon feminist concepts and international treaties to signify
the structural underpinnings of domestic abuse, namely the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), thereby framing the problem as a cause and consequence of gender inequality. In this respect, the gendered problem framing is decidedly feminist. Crucially, the VAWG movement’s strategy and sequencing of frames proved decisive, ensuring that gender remained a fundamental and inescapable feature in domestic abuse policymaking in Scotland.

However, these feminist ideas did not go unchallenged, leading to substantial diagnostic debate. As frame theorists argue, debates within the framing process are to be anticipated, as actors do not systematically accept all frames (Benford and Snow, 2000). This is especially true when actors hold different or conflicting interpretations of the problem, shaped by their distinct concerns and stakes, as was observed throughout the SPDA. Additionally, participants entered the process with differing levels of familiarity with domestic abuse. Some were from public sector agencies where domestic abuse was not their primary focus and therefore lacked expertise on the issue. Remarkably, rather than implementing a systematic strategy to recruit domestic abuse experts, civil servants selected representatives based on pre-existing contacts and networks (Scott, 2006). As a result, extensive educational work and power struggles over the meaning of the problem occurred.

Feminist representatives described the presence of several ‘dissenting voices’ who disputed the gendered causal story of domestic abuse (Interview 8, VAWG sector). Some participants, most notably a civil servant from the Housing Department, proposed gender-neutral frames and pathological factors, particularly alcohol and substance misuse, as causal explanations for violence. Another representative from the Health Department was a proponent of ‘generational cycle of violence’ theories (Scott, 2006). Members from VAWG organisations, who were already familiar with these ideas, refuted these explanatory theories. Crucially, pathological and ‘family dysfunction’ problem representations shift the focus from a women’s rights context, returning it to the private sphere of the family, meaning that the cause is no longer situated as women’s structural inequality (Scott, 2006: 140). A representative from the VAWG sector described these framing debates as exhaustive, stating: ‘The arguments [were] quite circular for a while. We didn’t seem to be making progress’ (Interview 25).

Crucially, the timing of events played a pivotal role in advancing these debates, moving the actors closer to a resolution. The SPDA paused its activities in the months leading up to the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999. Upon resuming several months later, its primary focus was on reviewing its work and finalising drafts. Interviewees from the VAWG sector recounted their collective concerns about re-entering the process and the possibility of the stalemate persisting. Nevertheless, after further debate, much to their surprise, the gendered definition was endorsed in the draft. One respondent explained that upon everyone’s return, there was a heightened sense of urgency and a greater willingness to find a solution; even those who were resistant made significant compromises (Interview 25). While substantial shifts in actors’ core ideas may seem unlikely, institutionalist scholars have shown that actors’ perspectives and understandings of policy problems can undergo significant changes over time as they participate in negotiations and debates within framing processes (Björnehed and Erikson, 2018: 114; Hall, 1993). This is especially true for those in the Partnership who lacked a strong understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse before participating in the discussions.

Subsequently, Scotland’s first national strategy on domestic abuse was officially launched in November 2000. The integration of a gendered definition marked
How are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effects?

a crucial first step in institutionalising these frames within policy, establishing the discursive boundaries for actors operating within the policy domain. However, even with this substantial win, the gendered framing of domestic abuse has faced continuous resistance. The next section provides more detail about how, why and where resistance emerged during the early years of adopting gendered frames, with a specific focus on whataboutery.

**Early stages of institutionalisation**

A major point of contention revolves around the appropriateness of gendered perspectives in representing the lived experiences of men victims/survivors. Some feminist campaigners have expressed legitimate concerns about the possible oversight of men’s experiences of violence within Scotland’s (gendered) policy approaches. Arguably, over the years, the Scottish government has developed a more nuanced approach to addressing this issue within policy (see Scottish Government and COSLA, 2023). Other individuals, lacking familiarity with domestic abuse, have sincerely inquired about men victims/survivors to deepen their understanding of the dimensions of violence.

Unlike these inquiries, the question ‘What about the men?’ frequently arises as an acrimonious outcry within public and policy debates in Scotland, employed to attack gendered constructions of the problem (Orr, 2007: 8). Markedly, many participants viewed this type of whataboutery as a long-standing form of resistance, with some assuming my familiarity of it, highlighting its widespread occurrence. Actors within the VAWG sector elaborated on how whataboutery is used by hostile actors to deliberately divert the conversation away from gender inequality: ‘“What about the men?” There remains, and always has been, this resistance. The fact that we have a gender analysis has always been contested and remains a sticking point for people not wishing to engage with the issue’ (Interview 4). In the limited extant literature on whataboutery, feminist scholars have convincingly argued that whataboutery ‘comes from a place of misogyny’, positing that it ‘has nothing to do with equality’ (Eaton, 2018: 394–5). Others have emphasised that it intentionally undermines the efforts of feminist organisations supporting women and children victims/survivors (Gadd et al, 2003).

Notably, resistant actors, particularly MRAs, have used the new structures facilitated by devolution to push their agendas. Male-supremacist groups like the UK Men’s Movement have employed a ‘masculinist’ stance on domestic abuse (Bouchard et al, 2003; Mann, 2008: 48), using evidence from family violence scholarship to assert that women are equally or more violent than men while arguing that policy approaches and services are biased against men (Orr et al, 2013). These groups have made particular use of the Public Petitions Committee to lobby the government to remove gender equality policy frameworks. For instance, the former Scottish chairman of the UK Men’s Movement submitted a petition to the Scottish Parliament in 2002 opposing the Scottish Executive’s domestic abuse advertising strategy, claiming that the problem was overstated. When the committee heard the petition, the petitioner swiftly criticised the Scottish Parliament’s framing of domestic abuse while also attacking and blaming feminists:

I am well aware of the feminist bias that exists in the Parliament and of the refusal to admit reality…. If we bear in mind the fact that men under-report
far more than women do, for obvious reasons, it is quite clear that there is a significant number of male victims. It is sheer hypocrisy to concentrate on only one section of society. That is what Nazi Germany did; it had special privileged groups and special groups that it deemed worthy of vilification. The feminists’ target is men, and fathers in particular. (Public Petitions Committee, 2002)

These activists have not only expressed their provocative ideas through new parliamentary channels but also leveraged segments of the Scottish media (McAuley, 2002), attempting to polarise the debate.

In response to this lobbying, the Scottish Executive commissioned research on men victims/survivors of domestic abuse in 2001 (Gadd et al, 2002), showcasing efforts to promptly address anti-feminist claims. Minister for Justice Jackie Baillie (Scottish Labour) announced the commencement of the research concurrently with the launch of the first national strategy on domestic abuse, stating: ‘like all members, I recognise the growing concern about provision for men who have been abused’ (Scottish Parliament Debate, 2000). Published in 2002, the findings concluded that men do not experience domestic abuse to the same extent or scale as women and that there is presently no requirement for specialist men’s services (Gadd et al, 2002). Since its release, government officials, feminists and other supporters have drawn upon the research to substantiate gendered policy frames and refute counterclaims suggesting equivalence in the use of violence within intimate relationships.

These anti-feminist strategies have extended beyond MRAs, infiltrating various institutional spaces. As the problem of VAWG spans across different policy domains, unreceptive and resistant actors have multiple arenas to contest gendered frames, each with their own logic of appropriateness that may or may not be supportive of feminist problem representations. Significantly, anti-feminist resistance has operated within the Scottish Parliament. During the annual parliamentary debates on VAWG, certain parliamentarians have devoted their time to inquire about men victims/survivors of violence and to challenge gendered problem representations, resulting in a ‘long-running debate’ between supporters and opponents of gendered frames (Scottish Parliament Debate, 2002). A former Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) characterised these efforts as actively resisting and obstructing progress: ‘I think it was used in a way to shut down [the debate]. To say that, “Actually, there’s not a deep gendered discrimination going on in society, it is just some men do it and some women do it”’ (Interview 22). Fortunately, only a few parliamentarians have resisted gendered policy frames, many of whom have not held positions of power within the government (Mackay, 2010). Nevertheless, the emergence of such resistance within formal political institutions is significant, especially in the early stages of institutionalising these frames. FI scholars studying the gradual institutionalisation of frames stress the importance of ideas gaining official recognition, whether formally through government statements or informally during policy debates (Björnehed and Erikson, 2018: 113). Thus, when parliamentarians openly opposed gendered frameworks at this stage, it undermined their credibility, posing obstacles in embedding these ideas in policy and practice.

Beyond the Parliament, whataboutery was identified within the publicly funded healthcare service. Since healthcare is a universal service, it is highly probable that victims/survivors will seek medical assistance at some point in their lives. Hence,
healthcare providers play a crucial role in recognising the signs of abuse, encouraging disclosures and offering support. However, their ability to fulfil these roles hinges on a strong understanding of domestic abuse. Crucially, two health practitioners explained that while there has historically been a lack of awareness of the gendered dimensions of violence within the National Health Service (NHS), there has also been a significant degree of active resistance. Notably, points of contention within the health sector shaped policy discourses and terminologies. A respondent engaged in health policy development reflected on the necessity of addressing whataboutery when formulating policy:

If I wrote [policy] and said, ‘We are looking at a policy on violence against women’, all I would get is: ‘What about the men?’ So, for me, it was a very logical decision to use a descriptor that ensured that we could still embed the gendered analysis, and that was central to any work we took forward on abuse. (Interview 17)

This quote is compelling in demonstrating how whataboutery has affected problem representations. Since the early 2000s, NHS Scotland has strategically adopted the term ‘gender-based violence’ in place of ‘violence against women and girls’ to alleviate potential resistance and provide a more inclusive descriptor that represents all victims/survivors. Importantly, policy remains rooted in a structural understanding of inequalities, with gender placed at the forefront. However, despite the implementation of these preventive strategies, hostility to gendered approaches has persisted. For example, in 2009, NHS Scotland published guidance for health workers on gender-based violence addressing whataboutery: ‘Many health workers ask “what about men?” Whilst men are at much less risk from gender-based violence, some men are abused in similar ways by other men and, sometimes, by women. However, men are more likely to be perpetrators than victims of gender-based violence’ (NHS Scotland, 2009: 4).

In summary, over the decade following the introduction of gendered frames in policy, a noticeable pattern of resistance has prevailed, marked by continuous occurrences of whataboutery. In many ways, the continuity of resistance is to be expected, as ‘persistence of some kind is virtually built into the very definition of an institution’ (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010: 4). Vocal dissent in Parliament and opposition from those with operational responsibility undoubtedly harmed the legitimacy of these frames. Consequently, the potential for transformative change brought about by adopting gendered and feminist framings of domestic abuse was limited by the resistance it faced.

Debating violence against men

As we progress along the timeline, resistance towards gendered framings endures and somewhat intensifies, with the initiation of the first Scottish Parliament debate on violence against men in 2010 presenting some noticeable shifts. Several respondents recalled apprehensions within the VAWG sector regarding its potential impact on future policy. In general, most parliamentarians participating in the debate supported gendered framings of domestic abuse, but a few resistant MSPs argued in favour of gender-neutral frames. The debate was notably contentious, with one parliamentarian
(Bill Aitken, Scottish Conservative) commenting: ‘it is a pity that the debate has become a trifle polarised’ (Scottish Parliament Debate, 2010). Some members explicitly attacked the gendered analysis, with an MSP (Malcolm Chisholm, Scottish Labour) criticising these efforts: ‘What depresses me about many of the speeches is that … some members, although not all, emphasise female violence against men as a way of rejecting the [gendered] analysis that I have outlined’ (Scottish Parliament Debate, 2010). This was particularly evident in the contributions of a long-standing critic of gendered frames, Mike Rumbles (Scottish Liberal Democrat):

I hope that we will all see the evil of domestic abuse for what it is – an evil that is perpetrated on the weaker member of a relationship. It is not a gender issue. If we treat it as such, no progress will be made in tackling its true evil. Members should not continue with the mistake of saying that it is simply a gender issue. (Scottish Parliament Debate, 2010)

This speech introduces themes that align with family violence theories, namely conceptualising domestic abuse as an individual or interpersonal issue rather than a structural one. These efforts to ‘bend’ the problem of violence away from gender equality serve as a key resistance strategy shared by anti-feminist actors in other cases (Mann, 2008; Dragiewicz, 2013; Krizsán and Popa, 2014).

According to my respondents, the initiation of the debate signalled a surge in lobbying by MRAs and non-feminist groups, with the Parliament showing some responsiveness to their demands. The debate was perceived as a crucial moment for resistance, with one respondent in particular describing it as a negative turning point (Interview 4, VAWG organisation). Notably, in the year of the debate, Abused Men in Scotland was founded, becoming the primary charity for male victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Abused Men in Scotland submitted a petition in the months preceding the debate to the Scottish Parliament, urging the government to overhaul all publicly funded action to fully acknowledge men victims/survivors. This perspective was endorsed by others, notably a freelance journalist and activist who criticised the relevance of gendered problem representations:

A framework for thinking is not a fact; it is a point of view. It has become a problem for the Scottish Government that, in its early days, the Scottish Parliament adopted the gender based analysis of domestic abuse and domestic violence as policy…. A framework for thinking is jolly good for a single-issue campaign on the outside that is demanding that a problem be addressed, but it is a problem for a legislature when that framework moves from the outside to the inside and becomes an ideological litmus test. (Public Petitions Committee, 2010a)

However, committee members maintained a firm stance on the necessity to preserve existing frameworks. As one MSP (Bill Butler, Scottish Labour Co-operative) stated: ‘we should not be looking at tearing down structures that have been built up over a number of decades’ (Public Petitions Committee, 2010b).

These efforts demonstrate that a small subset of actors have operated in opposition to government commitments and policy framings, aiming to ‘reopen and question policies that have been accepted’, thereby ‘bending’ the issue into a more contentious one (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021: 576). As resistors gained access to new formal
processes and channels, supported by sympathetic parliamentarians, the policy debate inevitably opened further, making it more permissible to challenge gendered problem representations (see Ahrens, 2018; Josefsson, 2020).

Moments of feminist advancement and backlash

While resistance to gendered frames has been a constant feature within the Scottish case, some interviewees suggested that it intensified during moments of positive change: ‘I think, in recent years, we’ve had to struggle a bit more with this [resistance], but I think politically, there’s always a backlash whenever you make any advances’ (Interview 17, health lead). Indeed, scholars have remarked upon the interdependent relationship between feminist progress and resistance. Most notably, Susan Faludi (1991: xi) popularised the term ‘backlash’ to capture the dynamic process where resistors, sensing a loss of power and a disruption to the status quo, ‘attempt to retract the handful of hard-won victories that the feminist movement manage[d] to win for women’ (see also Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). VAWG researchers have increasingly used the concept of backlash to uncover and understand the fluctuations of anti-feminist resistance (Mann, 2008; Dragiewicz, 2013; 2018). Concurrently, FI scholars have illustrated the link between pivotal moments of progress and anti-feminist resistance, highlighting how hostile actors exploit the same opportune critical junctures that allow feminists to enact change to ‘undermine, reframe and usurp’ policy development (Gaweda, 2021: 647; Bergqvist et al, 2013).

Interviewees provided clear instances where resistance intensified in Scotland. The first occurred around 2009 when the government broadened the policy problem from domestic abuse to VAWG (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2009). This shift in terminology is noteworthy, given that descriptors establish the discursive boundaries for what is considered to be the problem and what should be done about it (Bacchi, 2009; Hearn and McKie, 2010). It presented a pivotal moment, as policy stressed the connections between all forms of violence, situating violence as a continuum of women’s subordination (Kelly, 1988). Moreover, the alteration in descriptors explicitly named the perpetrators, framing the problem as men’s violence against women. However, this change was met with some resistance, as explained by a respondent from the VAWG sector:

I think that [resistance] came up really strongly when we moved from a domestic abuse strategy to a violence against women strategy. The resistance to a gendered analysis of domestic abuse had existed…. But when it was explicitly moving to a violence against women agenda, there was no hiding place because it was absolutely there named on the tin. (Interview 4)

A more recent example of heightened resistance occurred during the passing of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which created a specific criminal offence of domestic abuse and criminalised coercive and controlling behaviour. While the legislation is gender neutral, it is grounded within feminist conceptualisations of coercive control, which place control and violence within structural inequalities, thereby asserting its asymmetrical nature (Stark, 2007; Stark and Hester, 2019). Thus, the legislative process sparked a resurgence of the symmetry debate:
So, I think in recent years … that whole debate has been resurrected around equivalence and gender symmetry, and that seems to have moved on a bit because I think the voices in the male survivors’ arena thought they weren’t winning that particularly well because the discussion around coercive control has now taken centre stage. (Interview 17, health lead)

Indeed, after the 2018 Act, there has been a noticeable rise in explicit references to whataboutery and efforts to reject claims of gender symmetry within policy and official guidance (see Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers et al, 2019; Improvement Service, 2021). This is particularly evident in a practice guide for health workers on gender-based violence published in 2019:

The debate on the importance of gender in domestic abuse can be confusing. Some argue that women are as likely as men to perpetrate abuse, while others insist that women are predominantly victims of such abuse. The evidence shows that domestic abuse takes different forms and affects women and men differently. This led to a definition that provides a clearer picture on the need to understand gender as key to understanding domestic abuse. (NHS Health Scotland, 2019: 6)

Simultaneously, some domestic abuse organisations now openly confront whataboutery on their websites. Grampian Women’s Aid (2020), for instance, published a blog post addressing the question ‘What about the men?’: ‘Let’s take the opportunity to address this often-asked question […] there are many misconceptions about domestic abuse and men, often stemming from a desire for “equality” or “gender symmetry”. This misses the point about the nature of coercive control, which is a crime of liberty as opposed to violence.’ Other local Women’s Aid groups feature similar statements on their websites. The proactive stance adopted by these organisations in confronting resistance underscores its pervasiveness and the ongoing work required to institutionalise gendered frames.

There has also been a renewed push by MRAs and other proponents of gender-neutral approaches to challenge gender equality frames. As an illustration, a member of the public initiated a petition urging the Scottish Parliament to ‘remove the “gender-based crime” domestic abuse narrative and make it gender neutral and equal’ (Public Petition, 2021). Subsequently, certain sections of the Scottish press covered the petition (see McLaughlin, 2023), with a columnist and former police officer reportedly ‘look[ing] forward to our government setting aside the obvious inequalities of a gender-based policy to follow the evidence’ (Wood, 2023).

Some of this pressure has yielded success. In 2021, the Scottish government made new policy commitments, pledging to progress work to tackle violence against men and boys, including investing in services that support male survivors of rape and domestic abuse (Scottish Government, 2021: 102). Contrary to earlier statements, where its necessity was dismissed, a national strategy on violence against men and boys has been promised, though its current status remains uncertain. These commitments indicate some shifts in the government’s approach to the problem. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent the new strategy will incorporate a gendered framing of the problem and how it will align with the work of Scotland’s current VAWG strategy, Equally Safe (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2023). Indeed,
introducing a separate strategy could escalate tensions regarding the current portrayal of men survivors and may provoke further resistance towards gendered frameworks. At present, it is uncertain if a rising and targeted attack against equality policymaking is propelling these policy changes, and further research on this issue would be beneficial. What is certain, however, is that previous anti-feminist efforts have noticeably influenced feminist framing strategies and policy directions. The next section delves deeper into these effects.

The effects of resistance: persistence and anticipation

The Scottish case empirically demonstrates how ‘losers … lie low, waiting for an opportunity to pursue their own institutional agenda’ (Pierson, 2004: 154). While resisters have not achieved their goal of replacing gendered problem representations with gender-neutral frames, they have been persistent in their efforts. This persistence has borne fruit. Whataboutery has continually destabilised gendered frames, blocking these ideas from becoming fully institutionalised. Significantly, these tensions show no sign of abating, meaning that feminist policy gains are susceptible to future resistance attempts. Indeed, several respondents expressed concern that the perseverance of resisters could result in the gradual de-gendering of policy over time. This would likely give rise to more generic approaches to the problem, where the emphasis remains on benefitting everyone equally (Christoffersen, 2021), a prospect vehemently opposed by my respondents. Hence, interviewees frequently stressed the importance of ‘protecting’ gendered frames, indicating an awareness of the ‘fragility’ of existing gains and the difficulties in sustaining equality policies (see Mackay, 2010).

This brings me to my second point. The power struggles between feminists and resisters have created significant pressure for feminist activists, who find themselves cornered into repeatedly defending previous achievements while addressing ongoing attacks on equality (see Roggeband, 2018). Given the tenacity of resisters, feminists must continually anticipate resistance – which may or may not come – presenting a key constraining force for progressive change. Crucially, the energy consumed by maintaining gendered frames could have been redirected elsewhere, causing other pieces of work to be held up. In particular, accentuating the importance of gender within problem representations has resulted in the strategic downgrading of intersectional approaches and reinforced single-axis approaches (see McCabe, 2024). As one respondent emphasised, feminists ‘sometimes get caught up having to constantly fight the gender corner’, meaning that ‘we just lump all women together … and don’t look at the differences amongst us’ (Interview 17, health lead). Indeed, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996: 1653) stress that enduring conflicts between opposing movements, as observed in Scotland, can create and exacerbate intramovement tensions (see also Roggeband, 2018). In their attempt to overcome resistance, some sections of the Scottish VAWG movement have elided intramovement differences (Chappell, 2006b: 509).

In fact, a few interviewees from both the civil service and white-led feminist organisations, who hold considerable epistemic power and influence in constructing national policy, expressed reservations about expanding existing gendered frames to incorporate a more intersectional approach. They were concerned that reopening the debate to add further complexity to the problem could serve as a means for actors to de-gender policy. This cautious stance holds particular significance, as research
Leah McCabe

has identified the VAWG sector as a crucial influencer on the Scottish government’s approach to intersectionality (Christoffersen, 2024; Christoffersen and McCabe, 2024). The anticipation of resistance has, therefore, created a self-policing dynamic among feminists, causing an unintentional barrier to operationalising intersectionality. Ultimately, the persistence and anticipation of resistance have reinforced each other, giving rise to a vicious circle. The Scottish case serves as a practical example of the challenges in navigating the fine line between countering anti-feminist resistance and acknowledging internal conflicts that may arise when attempting to deepen understandings of the problem.

Conclusion

This article has explored how feminist policy frames are resisted within a best-case scenario over the long haul, paying close attention to its effects on policy trajectories and feminist strategies. Theoretically, it has expanded upon gender and politics scholarship on anti-feminist resistance through its synthesis of CFA and FI, providing a robust framework to uncover subtler manifestations of resistance. As FI is a ‘broad church’, this article contributes to its conceptual development, with its particular combination of discourse, power, processes and history offering refined analytical tools to study framing disputes and their effects on current and future problem representations. Its careful consideration of the interdependent relationship between actors, frames and institutions prevents the perpetuation of the ‘agency-versus-structure dichotomy’ found in some FI literature (Mergaert and Lombardo, 2014: 7). Thus, it provides a more profound understanding of the persistence of resistors who must navigate institutional obstacles, particularly within institutions where gender equality norms are relatively well institutionalised.

The article has demonstrated the utility of an integrated FI approach through a single-case study of domestic abuse policymaking in Scotland. From a theory-building perspective, placing a case with progressive policy framings under scrutiny contributes to the literature on anti-feminist resistance by offering a deeper analysis of resistance that operates under the surface. It demonstrates that Scotland’s pathway to constructing and institutionalising a gendered framing of domestic abuse has been obstructed by stubborn resistance, manifesting in the strategy of whataboutery. This form of resistance involves asking about men victims/survivors during public and policy debates about gendered violence, with the intention of disrupting the conversation while undermining gender equality frames. Identifying resistance within a best-case scenario demonstrates that no context is immune to opposition, emphasising the broader challenges of making equality policies ‘stick’, even within new institutions (Mackay, 2014: 568).

Furthermore, the Scottish case demonstrates that resistance does not need to be widespread within institutions to have a profound effect. Although resistors have been positioned as ‘losers’ in the debate with limited epistemic power in constructing the problem, their persistence has swayed policy trajectories and feminist agendas. Repeatedly countering and anticipating resistance has placed considerable strain on feminist activists, meaning that attention has been averted from operationalising intersectionality. Resultantly, the article has responded to Celis and Lovenduski’s (2018) call for more empirical and theoretical insights into the linkages between resistant and feminist strategies. It has underscored the significance of feminist scholars,
practitioners and campaigners counteracting anti-feminist resistance while also supporting the developments of feminist perspectives on domestic abuse in policy and practice. The study has also provided important lessons for intersectionality scholars regarding how women’s movements (un)intentionally downplay the significance of intersectionality when addressing threats to gendered policy gains. Finally, it has made timely contributions to VAWG scholarship, bridging the gap between practitioner, activist and academic knowledge on the functionality and effects of anti-feminist resistance, specifically whataboutery.

The task for future research should be to expand upon anti-feminist resistance to account for cases where resistance operates under the radar, including within ostensibly equal polities. This work is salient as the transnational scale of anti-gender mobilisations presents a tangible threat to feminist politics within these contexts (Engebretsen, 2022). These future insights would be beneficial in illuminating the short- and long-term effects of resistance on equality policymaking, alongside empowering feminists to effectively counteract it.

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**Notes**
1 The overturning of *Roe v Wade* serves as a striking example of how long-standing feminist gains are susceptible to regression.

2 It is essential to understand this reluctance in the context of austerity, as public sector agencies grapple with mounting financial and resourcing constraints amid shrinking budgets. Thus, the differentiation between reluctance and resistance requires further unpacking.

3 As Gadd et al (2003: 113) explain, the Scottish Executive’s public awareness campaign, ‘Behind Closed Doors’, used the Scottish Crime Survey statistics to assert that one in five Scottish women ‘live with the constant threat of domestic abuse’. The UK’s Advertising Standards Authority upheld the UK Men’s Movement’s complaint, clarifying that the survey ‘showed one in five women had experienced domestic abuse during their life, not that they lived with the constant threat of abuse’.

**Funding**
This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/X006891/1.

**Acknowledgements**
I am very grateful to my research participants for generously sharing their time and expertise. I wish to thank Fiona Mackay, the Political Studies Association Women and Politics specialist group, three anonymous reviewers and the editor for their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts. I would also like to express my gratitude to my former PhD supervisors for their continued support and feedback: Meryl Kenny, Claire Houghton, Richard Freeman and Anuj Kapilashrami.

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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How are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effects?


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How are feminist policy frames challenged and resisted, and with what effects?


