The other social identities in multinational or ethnofederations
Women’s and sexual minorities’ advocacy in Belgium

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The feminist literature on federalism tends to look for positive and negative effects of such state architectures on women’s lives (Chappell 2002; Hausssman, Sawer and Vickers 2010; Vickers 2010, 2011). As a number of scholars have argued more recently federalism is not either bad or good for women. It rather depends on how specific characteristics have an effect on the shaping of equality and social policies and on women’s movement options to intervene in these matters (Vickers 2010). This ‘conditional approach’ (Gray 2006) focuses very much on state features that are specific to federal systems, trying to figure out under what conditions women – and other social groups – can cash a federalism advantage. One of the issues raised in the margin is ‘territorial salience’, arguing that territorial salience makes it difficult for other social identities such as gender to get inserted into structures and policies, except if they manage to get intertwined with nationalist projects (Vickers 1994). Literature on ethnofederalism or multinational federations tackles the issue of territorial salience but mainly focuses on the impact of nationalist movements or ethnic/linguistic/cultural groups on shaping federal state architectures, their functioning and future. This begs the question of how other social identities fare in such state architectures.

This paper tackles the issue of ‘territorial salience’ more in depth, taking the Belgian case as an example, analysing how social movement organisations deal with it. It analyses the structures and strategies (both with respect to funding and activism) of the major women’s and LGBT movement organizations, looking for differences and similarities in the extent to which territorial salience is a threshold or political opportunity structure for these social movements. Comparing two social movements broadens the scope in that both movements have a different history and relation to the state. The Belgian LGBT movement is of a more recent nature than the women’s movement and has also more recently been politically recognized. Both movements also have a different agenda. This allows for comparing but foremost for multiplying the cases to study the impact of territorial salience on the structures and strategies of different social movements. Based on a series of interviews with respondents for the women’s and LGBT movements (see annex 1 for the full list) we show that the notion of territorial salience needs to be opened up to a broader concept of social identity, and that this salience of an ethnic/linguistic/cultural identity can indeed provide serious thresholds for social movements representing other social identities.

A feminist reading of federalism, territorial salience and multinational or ethnofederations

Much feminist literature on federalism initially focused on the negative effects of federal or multi level state architectures on women’s life and the enhancement of equality. An exclusive division of power between federal and state entities is much contested by feminist scholars. One of the first
issues pointed out by feminists studying federal systems is the gender bias inherent to the division of power in many federal systems. Chappell (2001), Irving (1994, 2008) and Gray (2006), studying the Australian case, and Mettler (1998), examining the case of the US, all argue that policy competencies of concern to women were mostly allocated to the state level, while policy competencies of concern to men relied with the federal state. By making them fall under the remit of different political levels, federal systems create distinct and inferior forms of citizenship for women as compared to men. In that they join many of the more traditional feminist criticisms of the state, underlining that states’ conceptualizations and organizations of policies contain a gender bias, which is disadvantageous for women.

This gender bias contained in the division of power in federal systems leads scholars like Resnik (2001) to plead for a form of what she calls multi-faceted federalism rather than the categorical federalism prevailing in the US. Categorical federalism focuses too strongly on the exclusive nature or division of powers, and, subsequently, on questions of where a certain power is located and which level is concerned (see also Irving 2007 on the Australian case). This focus on formal aspects loses sight of the substantive aspect of issues at stake, and especially the fact that both policy fields and the concrete life experience of – in this case – women is multi-faceted. Different policy issues can be intertwined, containing, for instance both a dimension of economic capacity and violence against women, while these two issues might reside at different levels in the federal state architecture. Categorical federalism, she argues, misses the dynamic interaction of issues across levels of governance, and the fact that both federal and state legislation are involved when it comes to concrete life experiences. Categorical federalism artificially uncouples those, leading to – in the US case – situations in which the intrinsic nature of problems is not recognized and women cannot substantially enjoy the rights they are formally entitled to (also see Baines 2006 on the Canadian case).

Also, an exclusive division of power might lead to inequality among women in case states do not dispose of the same (mainly financial) means to deliver adequate policies in these matters, while they are exclusively in charge of them. Richer states might deliver more extensive social provisions of particular importance to women or allow for a larger opportunity to participate in the labour market, both of which are important given the gendered dependence on the (welfare) state. In poorer states women might less benefit from opportunities and provisions provided by the state. More progressive states might allow for policies more in line with the interests and needs of women and the movements representing them, while less progressive ones might block the further emancipation and autonomy of women (Celis and Meier 2011; Riedle 2002; Teghtsoonian and Chappell 2008). This goes even more for the case where equalizing formulas among states do not consider the equalization of capacities to fund women-friendly policies (Vickers 2010).

While the former issues concern content, there is also a logistic and organisational argument against federalism articulated in feminist literature. Federalism, especially in the case of an exclusive division of power, increases the operating costs of women’s and other social movements striving for a promotion of interests across the federation. An exclusive division of power requires social movements to tackle multiple entry points at once, especially when tackling a policy competence located at the state level. This involves the need for a high amount of resources, in actors involved, money and time, and a considerable coordinating cost, things social movements do not necessarily dispose of. Haussmann (2005), studying abortion politics in the US, for instance argues that only conservative because wealthy political actors can navigate many sites successfully. Unitary states, or federal systems in which policies of particular concern to women are located at the federal level facilitate lobbying efforts for movement actors (see also Bashevkin 1998, or Smith's (2008) similar conclusion on the LGBT movements’ lobbying activities and strategies in Canada and the US).

Others argue that such a multiplicity of entry points or venues also opens up perspectives and actually provides for a federalism advantage. While poorer or less progressive states might block off policies of particular interest to women, the women’s movement might still progress in other states,
which then might have a contagion effect on policies pursued by poorer or less progressive states. This is especially interesting in federal systems where no exclusive division of power between the federal and state level prevails, allowing again for the furthering of policies of interest to women at one level whenever the other is not accessible. This is the venue shopping logic available in federal states, especially if the various levels have policy making power with respect to women’s issues (Chappell and Costello 2010; Franceschet 2010; Haussman, Sawer and Vickers 2010).

Today feminist literature on federalism is beyond the stage where it argues that federalism is good/bad for women, a conclusion often suggested by the case under scrutiny. The impact of federalism on women’s lives and the gender bias this reflects rather depend on specific features of federal state architectures, and on how these affect the shaping of equality policies and women’s movement organizations options to intervene in these matters (Chappell 2002; Riedle 2002; Sawer and Vickers 2001; Smith 2008; Vickers 2010, 2011). This ‘conditional approach’ (Gray 2006) focuses very much on state features that are specific to federal systems. In an attempt to find more structured evidence for which conditions generate a federalism advantage, Vickers (2011) distinguishes between symmetric and asymmetric federations. In symmetric federations women fare well with a cooperative form of federalism. This facilitates learning and innovating dynamics across the system (Chappell 2002; Chappell and Costello 2010). In asymmetric federations women fare well with a competitive form of federalism, at least if the competing governments are interested in pursuing women’s policies in order to gain their support (Vickers 2011).

The distinction between symmetric and asymmetric federalism is likely to be a salient one. In symmetric federations, much of the literature underlines, women activists and other social movements can make use of the opportunity of a federalism advantage if the level or levels in charge of that policy field dispose of the necessary means, i.e. policy and fiscal autonomy (Chappell and Costello 2010), if there is the willingness of political actors to promote and defend social issues and issues of equality (Chappell and Costello 2010; Pally 2006), and/or if the activists manage to access the system and/or make political decision makers promote equality by taking the relevant measures (Chappell 2001, 2002b; Sawer and Vickers 2001), especially if there are not too many sites of contestation (Chappell and Costello 2010; Haussman 2005; Smith 2008). All these conditions are not particular for federal systems, with the exception of the multiple entries allowing for venue shopping. Women’s movements access to the state and political actors access to means enabling them to conduct women friendly policies are features found in much of the literature on state feminism (Stetson and Mazur 1995; Mazur 2001; Stetson 2001; Outshoorn 2004; Lovenduski, et al. 2005; Haussman and Sauer 2007; Outshoorn and Kantola 2007). Multiple entry points for women activists and other social movements, are the federalism advantage. They allow for venue shopping not possible in unitary states, since there is no other level to be lobbied if the central level is not accessible.

Asymmetric federations seem to be another piece of cake. As Vickers rightly underlines (2010, 2011), asymmetric federations include much more risks of generating inequality by women in poor states not getting served, while other states do their utmost best to provide women with more than what their competitors do, and complicate the formation of a united feminist front, also because often other social identities dominate the political system and shape the institutional and organizational landscape. Here, Vickers touches upon an issue that has, interestingly enough, been little studied by feminist scholars, while probably being of utmost importance. Referring to the Canadian case, she argues (Vickers 1994) that a territorial organisation of politics suppresses interests that are not territorially organised. “(T)he more territory is the idiom through which federal politics works, the harder it is to insert gender (or race)” (Vickers 2009: 21). When territorial salience prevails, it is much harder for political issues to be framed in for instance the classical left – right debate and for feminist actors to try and seek allies and to operate across the system. This territorial salience makes it difficult for other social identities such as gender to get inserted into structures and policies, except if they manage to get intertwined with nationalist projects. For instance, Quebec feminists are more in
favour of federalism, making Vickers argue that in asymmetrical federations majority and minority women experience and see federalism differently and that asymmetric federations are beneficial for minority women, allowing for the pursuit of policies only of importance to them (see also Vickers 2010, 2011). Also, the nature of the contacts between federal and state level, especially if being intergovernmental, tend to create barriers for women, since issues of territorial salience and conflicts on the division of powers tend to shape their political agenda while women are seldom members of these institutions (see also Chappell 2002; Grace 2011; Teghtsoonian and Grace 2010; Sawer and Vickers 2001 on this point).

Vickers brings in both asymmetry and territorial salience, but while they can and often go hand in hand, the question is to what extent asymmetry does not simply refer to the dangers and problems already mentioned, while territorial salience adds a new issue. What Vickers calls territorial salience brings us to what the literature calls multinational federations (Burgess and Pinder 2007) or ethnofederations (Erk and Anderson 2009). The latter are an accommodation of “territorially based ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences in a divided society” (Erk and Anderson 2009: 191). In other words, the territories of an ethnofederation are not mere territories with administrative and/or political powers, they are at the same time the ‘home base’ of ethnic, cultural and/or linguistic identities formed by cleavages, which are highly competitive and conflictual. Much of that literature focuses on the organisation of power, mechanisms to represent minorities, power sharing mechanisms, and the status of minorities (Burgess and Pider 2007), on whether ethnofederations are ‘secession-inducing’ (as a result of war and ethnic conflict) or ‘secession-preventing’ (through pacification) (Erk and Anderson 2009), on how specific nationalist movements seek the congruence between demos and state (Erk 2008) or between the ‘national’ community and the shaping of the policy agenda, of policies and of the (welfare) state architecture (Beland and Lecours 2008). The existing literature is thus very much focused on the impact of the federal state structure on the dominant territorially based ethnic, ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities, and vice versa, and has little to no attention for the impact of that prevalence of ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups on other social groups in society. Beland and Lecours’ study (2008) of the link between nationalism and social policy however shows that social policy is often a major component of the effort of nationalist movements. While social policies are of utmost importance to many other groups in society such as women due to the gendered dependence on the welfare state, these policies get shaped by nationalist projects. Given the feminist analysis of federal state architectures, the question then becomes what – not necessarily territorial salience but – the prevalence of a given ethnic or other identity does to other social groups such as women, also concerned by these issues. In multinational or ethnofederations such as Belgium the whole state architecture is based on ethno-linguistic identity. In such state architectures this type of social identity plays an important role. The federal state architecture encompasses the recognition of the prevalence of this identity. This invokes questions on what such a recognition or rather prioritisation of a given social identity involves for the organisation and mobilisation on the grounds of another social identity not colliding with or even crosscutting the contours of the social identity put centre stage by the federal state architecture. This blank in both the feminist literature and the literature on multinationalfederalism and ethnofederalism is picked up by the present paper.

Belgian ethnofederalism: the dominance of ethno-linguistic identity

Over the last four decades Belgium turned into a more or less fully fledged federation. Although the broad lines of the current state architecture have been set down during the first state reform back in 1970 (Deschouwer 2006, 2009), Belgium officially calls itself a federation since 1993 and the current structure was established in the 1990s. According to Swenden and Jans (2006), the Belgian federation is characterized by a set of specific features, one of the most important being its double state level structure. Due to diverging aspirations of the two major language groups, the Belgian
The regions follow the logic of a territorial federalism. The Belgian federation is divided into three regions, covering Flanders, Wallonia and the region of the capital of Brussels. These regions are territorially defined, covering the Belgian territory without any institutional overlap. They are in charge of territorially bound policy areas, such as area development planning, agriculture, environment, rural development and nature conservation, housing, water policy, economic affairs, energy, local government, employment, public works and transport. The communities follow the logic of ethno-linguistic identities and cover the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking ones. Communities are in charge of cultural matters (including youth policy, leisure and tourism), education, ‘personalized matters’ (preventive health policy, assistance to individuals, etc) and social assistance. While as such this is a non-territorial form of federalism, limits are set to the radius of activity of the communities. While the institutions of the German-speaking community are in charge of members of their community living in the Eastern Cantons of the Walloon region, those of the French-speaking community deal with the remaining citizens of Wallonia and the French-speaking citizens in Brussels and those of the Dutch-speaking community with citizens in Flanders and the Dutch-speaking citizens of Brussels. In sum, a French speaking citizen living in Flanders still falls under the remit of the institutions of the Dutch-speaking community and vice versa. However, political life is largely organised along the logic of communities in that Brussels for instance has no community policy on its own, but the two major communities of the country separately and jointly organise community matters in the Brussels region.

The dominance of the ethno-linguistic identity in the Belgian federal state architecture also shows in other respects. While all regions and communities initially disposed of their own institutions (legislative and executive), the Flemish region and community merged their institutions, labelling them the Flemish Community (extensively contributing to the asymmetry of the Belgian federal state architecture). At the French side a similar merge is not possible, but recently increased efforts are deployed to increase the linkages between the French speaking in Brussels and Wallonia. And the German Community steadily increases its competencies in regional matters when it comes to the German-speaking Eastern Cantons.

The structure and basic funding of the Belgian women’s and LGBT movements

It is within this structure that the Belgian women’s and LGBT movements operate. As the political parties, the women’s and LGBT movements are divided along the linguistic cleavage, involving the
creation of Flemish and French organizations, often preceding the accomplishment of the federal state architecture in the 1990s. They are well adapted to that architecture and in fact have copied that structure in their own organizations. In some cases, the structure of the social movement organization reflects the double logic of the Belgian state level.

The major women’s organizations are the political women’s sections of the Flemish or French political parties and the four Flemish and Walloon umbrella organizations: the Flemish Women’s Council Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad (NVR), the French Women’s Council Comité de femmes francophones de Belgique (CFFB), both grouping plural women’s organizations, the French Comité Liaison des Femmes, also composed of affiliated women’s groups and the Flemish Vrouwen Overleg Komité that groups individual members. The French Women’s Council CFFB that falls together with the borders of the French community has a sub-structure focusing on Brussels and another one dealing with issues particular for the Walloon region.

Not all women’s organizations are members of the umbrella organizations. For instance, ELLAvzw (formerly SAMV), a women’s organization focusing on issues of relevance to (mainly Islamic) migrant women and funded by the Flemish government to act as a spokesperson for migrant women, is not (actually no longer) a member of the Flemish Women’s Council NVR. Given the political salience of migrant women’s issues, the unique position of ELLAvzw and its strong ties with the Flemish government, it is nonetheless one of the central women’s organizations in Flanders.

The LGBT movement also has some major umbrella organizations grouping most of the LGBT organizations (Borghs and Eeckhout 2010; Paternotte 2008, forthcoming): the Flemish umbrella organization çavaria; the French organizations arc en ciel Wallonie; and a bi-lingual Brussels organization Regenbooghuis Brussel/Maison arc en ciel Bruxelles. The latter has, similar to the CFFB, a Flemish sub-structure that works together with the Flemish organization çavaria and a French sub-structure working together with the Walloon organization arc en ciel Wallonie. Another French LGBT organization is Tels Quels. It considers itself as an umbrella organization, but actually is one and the same organization with antennas in various cities (and has for that reason not been included in the research).

Most Belgian social movement organizations are explicitly Flemish or French; bilingual federal organizations are the exception. And as long as a movement follows the logic of the state architecture and of the structure of political and social actors, there is no problem. ELLAvzw, the Flemish movement for girls and women of a foreign origin does so. It solely functions within the context of the Flemish region and community (though it sometimes also operates in the Brussels area), arguing that there is no French speaking partner to tackle the French side of the country, but also that the situation is different in the other parts of the country. It therefore only relies on the Flemish community for its funding of the structure and its activities, which makes their work be pretty straightforward.

The situation becomes more complicated once the language cleavage has to be bridged. An interesting case in this respect is the Brussels rainbow house. It solely operates in the Brussels region, but has the ambition to be bilingual in its approach. Although Brussels formally is a bilingual region, it costs the Brussels rainbow house a lot of effort to function as a bilingual organization. A major reason for this resides in the fact that many issues they tackle fall under the remit of the communities. Since part of its basic functioning is already subsidized by the community structure in charge of bilingual matters in Brussels (GGC/COCOM), project subsidies have to be asked for separately at the Flemish (VGC) and French (COCOF) community structure operating in the Brussels region. This requires the need to find compatible subsidy sources, several demands for one and the same project, a double (or triple) project administration, etc.

‘Ca nous complique la vie. C’est une de raisons pour laquelle nous avons créé une structure avec la coupole de la maison arc en ciel et les deux souscoupoles. (...) Il faut toujours trouver
un équilibre dans les subsides, il faut toujours rentrer trois voir quatre projets pour parfois une seule activité.’

Paradoxically, even in a region officially considered to be bilingual, an organization aiming at being so, has to work to a large extent through the unilingual community institutions. In the case of the Brussels rainbow house, the predominance of the ethno-linguistic cleavage as a basic logic for the state architecture definitely crosscuts and complicates the efforts by the LGBT movement trying to function in a formally bilingual region since even within such a region the language matters are mainly dealt with by each community separately. It would actually be near to impossible to get subsidized as a bilingual social movement organization. None of the communities would finance such an initiative and the federal state level does so only to a very small extent.

Notwithstanding such difficulties in developing bilingual initiatives, the movement organisations are not limited to the state level they belong to as a community. The Belgian women’s and LGBT movement organizations actually draw their financial resources from multiple governance sites. All movement organizations studied receive money from different policy levels and approach different governments with their demands. Concerning the financial interaction between the state and the movement organizations, the Belgian case shows the possibility to receive financial support from another level in case financial support drops, is insufficient or not accessible at the initial level. For example the Walloon LGBT movement arc en ciel Wallonie addressed the Walloon Region for financial support because the budget of the French Community was already taken by another LGBT movement Tel Quels. While the regions are in charge of socio-economic policy competencies they subsidize (part of) the French LGBT umbrella organization, while other similar organizations are mainly financed by the communities, formally in charge of person related competencies. In this respect, some respondents consider the Flemish situation as advantageous because it is less complex, the community and region being merged in one institution. Many others consider it to be more dangerous because “one can become a hostage of that one minister” and it is more complex but safer to be able to address two ministers and administrations for funding.

Similarly, many movement organizations (with the explicit exception of ELLAvzw) also address both one or several state levels and the federal level for funding. According to some of the interviewees, especially French women’s organizations address more often the federal level for financial support given the limited resources for gender equality at the Wallon region and French community as compared to the money that is available at the level of the Flemish community. This goes especially for the period 1995-2004, when the Flemish equality policy agency was established (covering both gender and sexuality). After the 2004 elections, the other regions and communities, with the exception of the German community, appointed a Minister or State Secretary

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1 All Flemish social movement actors acknowledge that the setting up of a policy infrastructure in charge of equality policies was beneficial to them. The women’s movement now disposed of a minister and administration within the own language community and which they could address for subsidies and projects, and which allowed for the structural subsidizing of the umbrella organizations and other initiatives (see also Celis and Meier 2011). Many French respondents referred to this advantage as an explanation for the degree of professionalization of the Flemish women’s movement as compared to that of its French counterpart. In the case of the LGBT movement, the Flemish minister for equality policies was of even greater importance, since it was the first time ever in Belgium that a minister of equality policies had LGBT people in the portfolio. While the coming into being of the Flemish minister of equality policies in the middle of the 1990s, was a supplementary actor the Flemish women’s movement could address next to the federal one (and which turned into the principal one over the last decade and a half), it was the only one in case of the LGBT movement, and it was only accessible to the Flemish LGBT movement. This allowed the movement to develop more quickly a structure and machinery that was stronger than those of the movement organizations being active in Brussels and the French part of Belgium since they did not dispose of the same sources to finance their structure and projects. While the French women’s movement could still rely on the federal state, as limited as it was, this source of funding was not available for the LGBT movement (see also Paternotte 2008).
in charge of equal opportunities and have some cabinet or administration staff in charge of equal opportunities. But some of them are formally only in charge of gender issues, and most of them dispose only of limited funds.

However, the Belgian case does not show a flexible picture of money streams whereby movement organizations sometimes receive their resources exclusively from one level in the federation and at other times exclusively from another. With the exception of CFFB, all the organizations studied draw the most fundamental and structural funding from the state level (mainly communities, sometimes regions) and federal funding is, again with the exception of CFFB, supplementary and project-based.

In return for the funds or political support given, governments expect a focus on the territory or group of that specific government. For instance, the Flemish and the French governments expect that their financial support is used for actions related to the Flemish or French territory/population. That poses a limitation to complementing lacking funds by attracting money from other levels because it would affect the exclusive focus on one territory/group. At one occasion there was the explicit prohibition to accept supplementary funds from another government at the risk of losing the original funds. The Brussels rainbow house was also not allowed to translate an awareness raising and informative brochure into French, because it had been financed with Flemish money and contained a preface by the Flemish minister. This preface was not to be taken out of the brochure but it was politically also not possible to translate it with money coming from another authority. The opposite scenario also occurs in case of an initiative that crosses the state borders whereby one government only agrees to subsidize if the other government at the same state level contributes. Competitive relations that might be at the advantage can also be of a disadvantage for the movement. For instance the organisation of the Gay Pride is at risk from 2012 onwards, since the Flemish authorities refuse to fund any more as long as the French Community does not contribute to the same extent. In the past however, competition between the Flemish and the Brussels ministers in charge of equality policy resulted in a bidding higher between them to support the Gay Pride. On another occasion the same animosity resulted in a limited budget for the women’s movement because they did not want to support the same initiative. This veto power of financing authorities complicates the Belgian movement organisations’ search for funding.

The activism and lobbying of the Belgian women’s and LGBT movements

When it comes to the activism and lobbying of the social movement organizations, the respondents from the women’s and LGBT movements all stress that their activism is foremost ‘problem driven’ not ‘level driven’: they address specific governments because they are in charge of the policy domain their demands at a certain moment in time relate to (organizing an event, an awareness raising campaign, developing a project on stereotypes in schools, lobbying for legislation, etc). They approach the political levels and actors being in charge of the issue they have on their agenda. In case it is a federal matter, they approach MPs, Senators, cabinets and ministers at the federal level, if it is a community matter, those of the communities, and if it is a regional matter, the regional ones. The LGBT movement today is very much focused on the state level, but in and prior to the 1990s the most important claims of the LGBT movements had to be fought at the federal level. The opening up of civil marriage and of adoption to same-sex partners and couples, and a broad anti-discrimination act where all federal matters. For that reason they concentrated on the federal level, not because the federal level was more open than the state level (for details on these cases see for instance Borghs and Eeckhout 2010; Meier 2009; Paternotte 2008). Similarly, the major umbrella organizations joined forces in the 1990s to co-organize the Belgian Gay and Lesbian Pride. Since 1996 the pride is organized on an annual basis, and at each occasion a memorandum is released, containing demands regarding both federal and community competencies. The women’s movement still focuses very much on the federal level, since many of the issues they work on fall under the remit of the federal state. Funding for specific projects related to their activism are also asked for at
the policy level in charge of the policy field they tackle. If the women’s movement launches a campaign on education, it will target the communities, more particularly the ministers in charge of education. For matters of equal pay for equal work it addresses the federal ministers. The problem driven approach also shows in times of elections, whereby especially the bigger organizations like the NVR produce separate memoranda for the different governments.

Hence, the two social movements address the different levels in the state architecture in function of their political agenda. While their structure and basic funding are primordially dependent on the state level, this is less the case with their lobbying and activism. However, this does not really involve venue shopping, which actually seems to surpass the movement organizations’ imagination. Although they considered it theoretically possible, they acknowledged never to have put it into practice and express that they found it a “difficult thinking exercise”. In all cases where policy issues fall under the remit of one policy level, a lack of access to that policy level would imply a (temporarily) stop of the activism regarding that topic. According to our respondents this was the most dominant scenario in their everyday life and not the one where they could de-block their activism regarding a specific subject by addressing another policy level. Surely, one policy level blocking would not imply that they could not continue their striving for other issues related to equality situated at another policy level, since all policy levels are in charge of equality. But, except in the case of shared policy domains between the federal and state level, this would transform their activism and not just transfer it. Since the federal and the state levels have their competencies and territory/population, it is not easy or even impossible to move from one level to another in order to lobby for the same cause.

Regarding the possibility of reorienting activism when facing a blockage at one policy level the Belgian case furthermore draws attention to the fact that the direction of such reorientation is often horizontal. The above mentioned example of the Wallon LGBT movements shift from the French Community towards the Walloon Region is an illustration of this. Another example is the finding that both the Flemish and the French movements are able to receive funding for their projects from the Brussels’ government. The same goes for lobbying these governments. There are however limits to this horizontal shift. There is a strict partition between Flanders on one hand and the French and Walloon governments on the other: a Flemish women’s organization would never receive money from the French Community or the Walloon Region or could not successfully lobby them with their demands, and vice versa. This will even be quasi impossible with a partner from that region/community (with the exception of Brussels).

Also, on the vertical axe, the federal level cannot orient all available funds to movements operating in only one state or prioritize the demands of the movement belonging to one of the constituent states above the ones of others. They have to safeguard a fair distribution of material and immaterial resources over organizations from the various regions and communities. Hence, the extent to which organizations can compensate financial or political drawbacks with federal funds and political support is limited, explaining the weak position of the French movements when not disposing of support by their own community/region. Furthermore, when moving from the state to the federal level, specific issues rise. When for instance a Flemish organization goes for federal funds or policy change it is compelled to cooperate with a French partner. That partnership might not be evident because of different agendas, views and culture. The federal minister in charge might be found to be less accessible because of a different language, political affiliation and networks being less developed (while the latter feature seemed to be an issue, the others seemed to be of lesser importance). Consequently ‘moving up’ from the state to federal level might entail a drastic change in the activism (e.g. related to the territorial scope, due to consensus with the agenda of the collaborating movement, and the adaptation to the other government’s agenda).

When it comes to activism and lobbying, the social movements also face specific challenges related to the ethno-linguistic organisation of the Belgian federal state architecture. This involves a division of the respective movements which they want or need to overcome. The organization of the political
and social spectrum along ethno-linguistic lines does not necessarily make gender or sexuality more difficult to accept as a political issue of importance (at least not in other terms than those of political representation, see Meier 2003, 2010). As several representatives of the LGBT movement said during the interviews, it is not politicians that are the hard ones to convince. But the organization of the political and social spectrum along ethno-linguistic lines increases the resources to be invested to constitute a front and win the case. Both the women’s and the LGBT movement organisations underlined that notwithstanding differences in perspective on specific matters, they all fight for the same cause. Flemish and French LGBT movement organizations might differ on whether LGBT people should be entitled to donate blood (although most of their leaders do take that position, at least on a personal basis), and opening up civil marriage and adoption for same-sex partners was more of a claim in Flanders than in the French speaking south of the country. Similarly, ELLAvzw argues that the French side has a different view on the issue of violence against women (focusing exclusively on women, while the Flemish civil society and other policy actors also focus on men) and the CFFB underlines that women and entrepreneurship is more of an issue on the French side. But they all fight for the recognition, acceptance and equality of sexual minorities or women. Or, as a representative of the women’s movement put it:

“Qu’elle est l’identité première de féministes? C’est de s’opposer au patriarcat! Ce patriarcat est unitaire des deux côtés. Ça devrait être notre première identité, mais ça ne va pas se terminer comme ça. Ça va se terminer en disant ‘j’aime mieux le patriarcat wallon ou le patriarcat flamand’. C’est exactement comme pour le mouvement d’ouvrier. Les ouvriers flamands, jusqu’à la guerre 14-18, … ils savaient que le patronat est le patronat. La préoccupation du patronat est de faire du profit. Ce n’est pas de faire du profit en flamand ou en français. C’est comme si maintenant ils préfèrent être dominé par un patronant qui fait du profit en flamand qu’en français. C’est quelque chose comme ça. Ce glissement de l’identité est absolument spectaculaire et probablement dramatique. C’est effrayant et ça va nous arriver aussi. Pour l’instant nous avons encore l’impression qu’il y a un patriarcat, mais on va finir par croire qu’il y a un patriarcat qui est plus ou moins mieux que l’autre et je trouve ça effrayant.”

Therefore, with respect to many matters, the movements try to work together. The claims regarding community competencies are formulated by the LGBT umbrella movement of the community concerned. And this requires more input because it involves bringing the movements together across the ethno-linguistic divide. For instance, the absence of a federal umbrella structure in both movements facilitating consensus within the framework of federal actions often places an extra burden on the shoulders of the organizations.

Also, the prevalence of the ethno-linguistic division may lead to a lack of resonance on behalf of the political elite. The Flemish LGBT movement underlined, for instance, that a French minister in charge of LGBT issues might not see the necessity of meeting a demand of the Flemish LGBT movement if this issue is not also supported by a French demand because that sheer fact shows that in their own constituency there is no electoral gain to be expected. The issue of electoral advantage was especially seen as crucial by the Flemish LGBT-movement, and was stressed as one of the main reasons why policy change at the federal level is not/lesser to be expected in case of a French minister, since the French LGBT movement organizations are less strong.

Social identities and their faith in multinational or ethnofederations

Belgium is an ethnofederation that originated in the accommodation of ethnic-linguistic divisions in society (especially the Flemish one), and hence is highly marked by a mapping of ethnic-linguistic identities onto the sub-state territories. How does such a federal state architecture shape the possibilities for other social identities engaging with the state? Our analysis of the structure, funding seeking and lobbying activities of the women’s movement and LGBT movement organisations points
at the limitations that ethnofederalism sets for other social identities than the ones shaping the ethnofederation. Firstly, it strongly reduces, and in the long run might even totally erase, the federalism advantage that these groups can experience in a federal system. Secondly, ethnofederations might even result in a major federalism disadvantage for other social groups in that the federal level tends to become inaccessible for their lobby activities.

Our analysis of the activities of the women’s movement and LGBT movement organisations showed that they adopt their own structure to the territorial structure of the federation. Notwithstanding practical inconveniences of copying the federal state structure into their own (e.g. the Brussels LGBT organisation rainbow house), this operation does allow these organisations to successfully address multiple sub-states with their funding requests and substantial political and policy demands. In other words, to a certain extent it allows them to cash the federalism advantage.

Nevertheless, this structural adaptation to the territorial configuration of the state, also opens the door for the social identity that these territories carry to come in, and this in turn undermines the federalism advantage. The territorial split allows for a different cultures to flourish and diverging political agenda’s of the linguistically divided organisations. This dynamic is in some cases also strengthened by sub-state governments’ requests for exclusiveness in return for financial support. The territorially divided organisations hence tend to/are incentivised to adopt the social identity that comes with the territory, to become Flemish, French (or Walloon) organisations, not only in a territorial sense (how they are structured), but also identity-wise – i.e. what they are like, how they operate and what they go for. The exclusive Flemish organisation ELLAvzw is a good example of inscribing the gendered identity into the Flemish one: notwithstanding that ethnic minority women issues are evidently not limited to the Flemish territory, they opt for a Flemish organisation, with a Flemish agenda and cooperation with the Flemish government. However not as radical, the same tendency is visible with the other organisations studied. The net result of being confined to the sub-state territories is that these organisations operate as within a unitary state, thereby missing out on the federalism advantage of having multiple access points and the possibility to avoid veto players.

The adoption of the dominant social identity in turn generates an important disadvantage: it hinders activism at the federal level. Federal competencies – which, as noted earlier, remain important for the civil society organisations studied – become more difficult, unattractive and costly (in terms of coordination) to lobby as the linguistically divided organisations drift apart. Their core business being gender and sexual equality however requires them to lobby federal government: not doing so leaves many important policy areas unaddressed and cannot be but a drastic loss of impact of these movements. Civil society organisations that would need to be operational at the federal level but fail to do so because of their sub-state identity not only lose a federalism advantage, they also experience a specific federalism disadvantage. The Belgian cases of the women’s movement and the LGBT movement organisations operating in an ethnofederation based on ethnic-linguistic identity indicate that these mechanisms do exist and increasingly retract federal policy domains from the demands for taking gender and sexual equality into account.

In sum, the dominant identities in ethnofederations seem to hinder state-society relations based on other social identities by posing a threat to the effectiveness of social movement organisations aiming at advancing the status of other social groups than the one the federal state is built upon.

In multinational or ethnofederations needs and interests related to gender or sexuality and those related to the grounds on which the federation is built can go hand in hand. But this is more likely to be the case for federations containing small (spatial) minorities with very different interests and needs from those of the majority of the population. One might think of indigenous populations or populations with a very different religious background. We can, however, not assume that the identity on the grounds of which the federation is structured and gender or sexuality are intersectionally related one to another and that this intersectionality entails particular needs and interests. The point for the women’s and the LGBT movements in Belgium is that the state
architecture, its processes and dynamics go back to the centre – periphery cleavage, while both the
women’s and the LGBT movements mainly find their origins in the cleavage between the church and
the state, and the women’s movement to a certain extent also in that between labour and capital. In
many federations the social identity and political cleavage on the grounds of which the state
architecture has been/is being designed, is of a fundamentally different nature than the political
cleavage having brought along the women’s or LGBT movement. And this leads to a division of the
respective movements which they need to overcome in their struggle.

Would the Belgian women’s or LGBT movements have done better or been more successful in a
federal state architecture not reflecting multiple nations or ethnicities? Not necessarily. They might
also have faced difficulties in obtaining funds or defending their issues. But multinational or
ethnofederations impose a supplementary threshold for social identities other than those structuring
the state architecture, its rules and processes.

There are two lessons to draw from this insight. First, feminist scholars of federalism should study
more in depth what Vickers calls ‘territorial salience’. It would be useful though to replace this
concept by that of social identities (or eventually groups), as it is used in studies of political
representation, because the issue at stake reaches beyond that of territorial salience. The concept of
social identity allows for understanding that there might be different social identities prevailing in
society at a given moment of time based on different dimensions (ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality,
religion, etc.), partly overlapping, partly being juxtaposed. Social identities allow for a broader
understanding of the extent to which some groups in society fare well with federal projects and
others do not. This brings us to the second lesson to draw. Scholars studying multinational or
ethnofederations should understand that they miss a large part of the story if their analyses of the
extent to which justice is done to ethnic, language or cultural groups, or to which extent the state
architecture, rules and processes of multinational or ethnofederations meet the requirements of
democracy, do not link to the understanding that justice and democracy are issues concerning many
different social groups or identity in society and that, therefore, important components of citizenship
get lost.

**References**

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Lovenduski, Joni et al. (eds) (2005), State Feminism and Political Representation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Vickers, Jill 2009


Annex 1: List of interviews

25/6/2010, Ghent, Vrouwen Overleg Komité (VOK, Women’s reflection committee, Flemish umbrella organization regrouping women’s organizations defining themselves as pluralist)

28/6/2010, Brussels, Nederlandstalige vrouwenraad (NVR, Dutch speaking women’s council, major Flemish umbrella organization regrouping women’s organizations)

30/6/2010, Brussels, Comité de liaison de femmes (CLF, Women’s liaison committee, French-speaking umbrella organization regrouping women’s organizations defining themselves as pluralist)

2/7/2010, Brussels, Comité de femmes francophones de Belgique (CFFB, Committee of Belgian French-speaking women, major French umbrella organization regrouping women’s organizations)

7/7/2010, Ghent, Fonds Suzan Daniël (Foundation Suzan Daniël, foundation archiving, documenting and studying the Belgian LGBT movement)

9/7/2010, Brussels, Regenbooghuis Brussel/Maison arc en ciel Brusel (Brussels’ rainbow house, major umbrella organization of Brussels LGBT organizations)

9/7/2010, Antwerp, çavaria (çavaria, major umbrella organization of Flemish LGBT organizations)

13/7/2010, Antwerp, Steunpunt allochtone meisjes en vrouwen (SAMV (now ELLAvzw), Support office foreign girls and women, major Flemish umbrella organization for foreign girls and women)

15/7/2010, Brussels, Arc en ciel Wallonie (Arc en ciel Wallonie, Rainbow Wallonia, major umbrella organization of Walloon LGBT organizations)