Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments

Edited by Petra Ahrens and Sonia Palmieri

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Abstract

Gender equality reforms implemented across various parliaments around the world have diversified. Introducing the thematic issue Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments, we trace the context of making parliamentary institutions more gender-sensitive. We highlight both international organizations' top-down efforts and grassroots movements' bottom-up approaches and emphasize the complexities of descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. We argue that next to the broader setting, feminist institutionalism provided a critical lens to examine these relationships while acknowledging the need for gender-sensitive parliaments that prioritize gender equality. We illuminate contributions from both the Global South and North and pay particular attention to "extraordinary cases" as well as methodological, theoretical, and conceptual innovations, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in institutionalizing gender equality in diverse political contexts.

Keywords

critical actors; gender equality; gender-sensitive parliaments; governments; parliaments; policy reform; political parties; political representation; procedural reform

1. Introduction

The scope of gender equality reforms implemented across various parliaments around the world has diversified. International organizations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the OSCE, or the European Institute for Gender Equality have played an essential, if top-down, role in promoting and diffusing gender equality norms in political institutions, particularly in parliaments, the core topic of this thematic issue. In parallel and sometimes in partnership, women's

organizations worked from the bottom up at regional, national, and transnational levels to push for gender equality, often from a more intersectional angle.

In extant research, women's representation and particularly electoral quotas have captured significant attention (Baker, 2019; Dahlerup, 2006; Franceschet et al., 2012; Krook, 2009; Lang et al., 2022; Rubio-Marín & Lépinard, 2018), across multiple regions. With systemic tracking of the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments over the past three decades, a spotlight has been cast on the progress and setbacks made at the national, regional, and international levels. Research has drawn connections between the presence of women (descriptive representation) and their specific contribution to policy and procedures considered by these institutions (substantive representation; see, for instance, Catalano Weeks, 2022). When women are present they raise new policy agendas and consider old agendas from new perspectives and they embody new role models for others, including young and gender-diverse people (symbolic representation; Lombardo & Meier, 2014; Verge, 2022a, 2022b).

Of course, the connections between descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation cannot—and should not—be oversimplified, although they are co-constitutional (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). Feminist institutionalism (FI; Kenny, 2007; Mackay, 2014; Waylen, 2017) has aimed to explore the complexities in these relationships, with a particular focus on the role of institutions in mitigating "gendered impact." FI has provided a lens through which to broaden our inquiries about the gendered nature of the political institutions women participate in and lead (Chappell, 2006; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Lowndes, 2014).

Over time, our perspective has broadened from investigating representational aspects and gendered policy-making to the organizational environment and how it impacts gender (in)equality. Parliaments are increasingly encouraged to reconsider their internal processes, practices, and norms to become "gender-sensitive." A gender-sensitive parliament is defined as one which "values and prioritises gender equality as a social, economic and political objective and reorients and transforms a parliament's institutional culture, processes and practices, and outputs towards these objectives" (Childs & Palmieri, 2023, p. 177). Achieving a gender-sensitive parliament requires substantive policy reform in a range of areas including working hours and cultures to improve work/life balance; work health and safety regimes to reduce gender-based harassment, intimidation, and assault; and work processes and outputs (e.g., legislation and policy) to normalise gender equality accountability mechanisms in the workplace (Childs, 2020; IPU, 2012, 2016; Palmieri, 2011, 2018, 2021). Importantly, reforms ought to relate equally to MPs and all those who engage with and contribute to the parliamentary ecosystem, including staff, political advisers, experts, and citizens.

Academic scholars are increasingly interested in the process by which these reforms are implemented, as well as their effectiveness and impact, resulting in a constantly growing field of research (Childs & Palmieri, 2023). Much of this academic research has been informed by collaborations between practitioners from international organizations and academics, delivering innovative output in the form of grey literature, or publications designed and managed by international organizations (cf., for some recent publications, Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024; Ashe, 2022; Childs & Palmieri, 2020; Palmieri, 2021; Smith, 2022). While this grey literature has served an important function in outlining good practice across parliaments, academic research has also proven useful in bringing a more critical lens to the development and effectiveness of these reforms, including, where required, a more critical consideration of the role of international organisations in this work.

Yet, there are still gaps in academic research. Particularly evident in the academic gender-sensitive parliaments literature to date is a focus on reforms initiated in the (Euro–American–Australasian) Global North rather than the Global South (Childs, 2016, 2020; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Palmieri & Baker, 2022), although there are important notable exceptions (Rai & Spary, 2019). This focus on developed, rather than developing, parliamentary institutions risks a more comprehensive analysis of the opportunities and drivers for change, as well as nuanced understandings of very different political contexts. In response, we editors organised a hybrid workshop, Gender and Parliament, in October 2023 at Tampere University, Finland, to address these challenges. We considered such a workshop a good way to introduce a diverse set of authors to each other across the globe, to allow an initial review in a relatively friendly format and to create coherence to the thematic issue by emphasising, in the discussion, the key themes and questions of gender-sensitive reforms.

2. Unity in Goals, Diversity in Approaches

In this thematic issue, we showcase research from colleagues in both the Global South and the Global North, and present "unusual suspects" as well as conceptual elaborations across the disciplines of political science, anthropology, sociology, and development studies.

The contributions to the thematic issue address important cross-cutting questions such as:

- Who are the critical actors that drive gender equality reforms in parliamentary institutions and to what extent do they rely on/mobilise supportive coalitions or networks for those reforms?
- How do local contexts—political, economic, and cultural—enable and/or resist gender equality reforms within parliamentary institutions?
- Which analytical and theoretical frameworks can contribute to a better understanding of changes across different contexts?

In answering these questions, authors uncovered extraordinary cases of reform in countries that are rarely the focus of gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms. Often hidden in international discussions because of the one-China policy, Taiwan is presented as a gender equality leader in Asia with an almost gender parity parliament. In her contribution, Huang (2024) outlines the continuing challenges—even in such a gender-friendly environment—to systematic parliamentary gender mainstreaming. She argues that while gender equality achievements have been driven by a strong women's movement, political party elites have yet to prioritise and operationalise an institutional gender equality culture.

The role of autocratic regimes in introducing gender equality reforms is interrogated in depth by Lončar (2024). Loncar shows the contradictory, but politically expedient, way in which the autocratic regime in Serbia has adopted gender equality reforms while at the same time undermining their impact and fueling anti-gender sentiment. Similarly, Baker and Palmieri (2024) reflect on the autocratic nature of a former government in Fiji, which also oversaw the introduction of a gender mainstreaming mandate for parliamentary committees— designed by an international consultant—without significant local buy-in. Baker and Palmieri compare this process with a more localised contestation of an electoral gender quota designed by political elites in Samoa and significantly tested in the most recent election in 2021, which resulted in more women being elected. Considering the passage of the sexual crime bill in the parliament of Indonesia, Siregar and Prihatini (2024)

uncover both the role of men as critical actors in the legislative process and also a range of critical acts that ultimately secured its enactment. These included opportunities for dialogue and compromise on language, and the election of a new parliament that was more amenable to its passage.

Women MPs' political survival is brought to the fore in Espírito-Santo et al. (2024) discussion of parliamentary questions in South Africa. Exploring the relationship between gender and interparty competition, Espírito-Santo et al. find that women "maximize their career prospects" by asking parliamentary questions that are perceived to reflect "hard" policy domains rather than the so-called "women's issues," with implications for the substantive representation of women.

This thematic issue also digs deeper into those parliaments that have already been the subject of analysing gender-sensitive parliaments—notably, Sweden, the European Parliament, and Australia. Each of these articles, however, brings a new focus. Erikson and Josefsson (2024) draw our attention to the increasing threat posed by the radical right to longstanding norms of gender balance in political institutions in Sweden. With fascinating evidence of the difficulties experienced by MEPs in balancing work and family in an institution that is, for most, far from home, Frech and Kopsch (2024) find that the European Parliament needs to do more to move "beyond the rhetoric" of being a family-friendly parliament. Barr et al. (2024) present recently implemented wholescale gender equality reforms in the Australian parliament and point out the important role of external influencers—including feminists working in academic institutions—as essential drivers.

Besides these extraordinary cases and (contested) "role models," the thematic issue contributes to methodological, theoretical, and conceptual debates. Ahrens et al. (2024) discuss in their article the challenges of comparing parliaments operating in very different national contexts and offer a novel perspective for future comparative analyses. They suggest applying the "most significant change" approach (Davies & Dart, 2005) to collect through a bottom-up, inductive, and participatory approach "stories of significant change." The method proved valuable in incorporating practitioners' perspectives on crucial, even if sometimes singular, gender-sensitive changes and their societal broader impact.

Banerjee and Rai (2024) referencing the Indian parliament, expand on the fundamental importance of local ownership of gender-sensitive reforms. They innovate theoretical debates on gender-sensitive parliaments by combining institutional, postcolonial, and intersectional perspectives. Building on researching the Indian parliament, they bridge the gap between international and local understandings of gender-sensitive parliaments and introduce two new approaches—"vernacularisation" and "professionalisation." A vernacular approach uncovers the points at which international norms must be "translated" into local systems and cultures, while a professional approach sheds light on how local institutions perpetuate deeply gendered norms, vocabularies, and performances.

Childs (2024), scrutinizing her extensive work in the UK House of Commons and other parliamentary venues, conceptualizes the "feminist academic critical actor" by engaging with earlier concepts of "feminist critical actors" (Childs & Krook, 2006, 2008) and "feminist critical friends" (Chappell & Mackay, 2021). She emphasizes the "feminist academic critical actor's" role in instigating and instituting institutional change while acknowledging the potential costs of engagement, particularly for minoritized and/or precarious academics. Furthermore, she highlights the dual role of academics as both agents and analysts of change,

addressing the responsibilities, challenges, and potential harms they face in transforming masculinized parliamentary institutions.

In a comparable move, Barr et al. (2024) engage with gender-sensitive parliamentary change in Australia through an auto-ethnographic approach and explore the specific role of feminists in the academy as catalysts behind reforms. Extending Celis and Childs' (2020; see also Childs, 2024) conceptualizations of feminist academic critical actors, they provide a novel typology comprising four successful strategies for policy change through feminists in the academy, both as insiders, designing credible policies, and as outsiders, amplifying anonymous voices without risking their institutional reputation.

Ahrens and Meier (2024), finally, transfer the concept of gender-sensitive parliaments to parliamentary groups and discuss them as key actors in achieving a gender-sensitive parliament. They discuss how parliamentary groups can improve parliamentary functioning across four aspects: representation, policy-making, engagement with societal interests, and groups as gender-sensitive workplaces, and scrutinize these against the background of broader parliamentary and party contexts.

Next to methodological, conceptual, and theoretical contributions as well as the diverse cases, this thematic issue also presents a broad variety of topics, demonstrating the wealth of research on gender equality reforms in parliaments. Next to classical politics and gender topics like leadership, quotas, or parliamentary questions, the issue covers policy-making regarding gender-based violence, gender mainstreaming, and organizational aspects, such as parents in parliaments and parliamentary groups.

Moreover, the issue engages with a broad scope of electoral systems and their parliamentary institutions. Majority systems include the first-past-the-post system of India (Banerjee & Rai, 2024), Samoa (Baker & Palmieri, 2024), and the UK (Childs, 2024), and the alternative vote in Australia (Barr et al., 2024). Proportional systems are represented by the European Parliament (Frech & Kopsch, 2024), Fiji (Baker & Palmieri, 2024), Indonesia (Siregar & Prihatini, 2024), Serbia (Lončar, 2024), South Africa (Espírito-Santo et al., 2024), Sweden (Erikson & Josefsson, 2024). Moreover, Taiwan features a mixed system (Huang, 2024) and Ahrens and Meier (2024) engage with different systems when discussing gender-sensitive parliamentary groups.

Likewise, gender equality reforms occur in different political systems, including democratic and autocratic ones and the case of Taiwan, where statehood is contested within the one-China policy (Huang, 2024). Whether the gender equality reforms go beyond genderwashing (Lončar, 2024; see also Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022) and lead to sustainable transformations of parliaments into gender-equal workplaces requires further attention in future research.

Finally, as emphasised in the beginning, the articles cover both Global South and Global North countries, which leads to a more balanced picture of gender equality reforms on a global scale. All these varieties— topic, electoral, political systems, and geography—demonstrate the general compatibility of the concept of gender-sensitive parliaments independent of national or supranational context.

3. Conclusion

The articles in this thematic issue illustrate the wealth and diversity of gender equality reforms across different regions. They also demonstrate the challenges that occur, not least in settings where democracy is still or again contested. Overall, the broad range of reforms is striking given the worldwide increase in radical right and populist parties, anti-gender mobilizations, serious threats towards equality actors, and generally democratic backsliding (see, for instance, Bogaards & Pető, 2022; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018).

The contributors to this issue covered the important question of critical (feminist) actors that can drive gender equality reforms in parliamentary institutions and to what extent they relied on or mobilised supportive coalitions and networks for those reforms. As the articles show, change can be driven by external or internal actors or coalitions between them. By engaging with the actors, the articles also highlight the impact of local contexts (political, economic, and cultural), on which reforms are discussed and accepted, and which barriers need to be overcome to get reforms adopted. The empirical articles were framed by theoretical and conceptual contributions engaging with overarching questions of change agents, research approaches, intersectional aspects, and so far overlooked parliamentary actors.

Nevertheless, there are still many gaps to be closed, be it as activists, institutional equality actors, researchers, or any combination of these. Building on the case studies from different regions presented in this issue, future research should explore the lessons about institutional gender equality reforms: Which ones are universally shared and/or applied, or are they by nature, always localised? Likewise, parliaments are one but not the only important political institution and research could compare more closely what parliamentary institutions could learn from gender equality reforms in other political institutions or vice versa. Maintaining exchange between activists, institutional equality actors, and researchers across all political institutions promises to trigger additional reforms and to secure what has been accomplished so far.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Critical Actors and the Challenges in Mainstreaming Gender in Taiwan's Parliament

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Abstract

Taiwan is currently Asia's leader in gender equality on three indicators: Its national legislature comprises 42 percent women, the largest proportion among all Asian countries; it was the first Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage; and it has a popularly elected woman president not from a politically established family. Despite these advances, efforts to make Taiwan's parliament gender-sensitive has encountered constraints. While new institutions were created to make the parliament a more gender-friendly workplace, little progress was made regarding gender mainstreaming in the legislative process. This article points out that parliamentary parties are missing actors in gender mainstreaming. The article concludes that unless all constitutional branches practice it, gender mainstreaming as a state strategy to promote gender equality remains challenging.

Keywords

gender; gender mainstreaming; gender-sensitive parliament; parliamentary groups; women's movement

1. Introduction: Babies in the Parliament's Meeting Chamber?

On February 1, 2016, the first day of the first session of Taiwan's 9th Legislative Yuan (Taiwan's national legislature, hereafter parliament), a newly elected party-list member of parliament (MP), Wan-ru Yu, pushed a baby stroller toward the parliament. She wanted to bring her six-month-old son into the meeting chamber. She did not succeed, but her action made news. Two days before she took the action, Yu had posted a picture of Italian politician Licia Ronzulli holding her baby in a meeting in the European Parliament in September 2010. She commented that such a scene could not happen in Taiwan (Liberty Times, 2016). And when Licia Ronzulli brought her babies into the European Parliament, her actions were allowed, but not in her own country. The Italian parliament did not allow women to bring their babies until the rule was changed in 2022, and the

first time a baby was present in the Italian parliament was in 2023 ("Italy welcomes baby to parliament," 2023). Women politicians in various countries have brought babies into parliament over the past decade, and more and more countries now allow women politicians to bring their small children to parliament or even into the meeting chamber. Such change is related to the global increase of women in parliament—the global average proportion of women in parliament increased from 11.3 percent to 26.5 percent between 1995 and 2022 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023, p. 2).

Moreover, when Yu attempted to bring her baby into the parliament's meeting chamber in 2016, Taiwan was on its way to becoming arguably Asia's most gender-equal country. That year, Taiwanese voters elected the country's first female president, Tsai Ying-wen. Tsai did not come from a politically established family, which was unusual for an Asian female national leader. The proportion of women in Taiwan's national legislature also passed the 40 percent threshold in 2016. When it reached 42 percent in 2020, Taiwan led in this category as Asia's average was, and still is, less than 30 percent. Besides the achievement in women's political representation, Taiwan also legalized same-sex marriage in 2019, a first among Asian countries. Taiwan leading Asia in gender equality has been reported on and recognized by the scholarly community and international media. Comparative studies on Asian women's political representation and participation repeatedly showed that Taiwan had a higher proportion of women's political representatives (Iwanaga, 2008; Joshi & Echle, 2023; Joshi & Goehrung, 2018; Prihatini, 2019). Brysk (2021) called Taiwan Asia's most gender-equitable nation in her study of Taiwan's democratization experience, and Jacobs (2014) named Taiwan the beacon for Asia's gays in his news report in *The New York Times*. Despite this impressive record, efforts to make Taiwan's parliament more gender-sensitive, whether as a legislature or workplace, have encountered great challenges.

Based on interviews with critical actors and parliamentary records, this article identifies how critical actors brought about gender equality reforms in Taiwan's parliament. In so doing, this article shows that their efforts were curtailed because while the government adopted gender mainstreaming as a mandate, the parliament has not. I interviewed five critical actors who were, and some still are, involved in mainstreaming gender in Taiwan's parliament. Each interview lasted one to two hours and each interviewee's background and role in the parliament is shown in the Supplementary File. Each interviewee's background is described when their experiences or opinions are first discussed. Parliamentary records used for this article included information and data from the parliament's website, meeting minutes of the parliament's Gender Equality Commission (GEC), and parliamentary Gazettes.

Discussing Taiwan's experience is important for three reasons. First, as Asia's leader in gender equality, if mainstreaming gender in the Taiwanese parliament is challenging, other national legislatures in this region could also find it hard, or even harder, to achieve. Second, Taiwan is isolated from the international political community. Its data and experience usually do not appear in international documents and datasets, such as those compiled and published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. A study on Taiwan's experience enriches our understanding of the gender-mainstreaming experience of parliaments. Third, recent literature on gender mainstreaming in parliament has "focused on the role of gender-focused bodies within parliament" (Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020). And, as shown below, critical actors helped to establish an institution that looked like a gender-focused body in Taiwan's parliament, but they encountered difficulties with getting MPs involved. This article shows why Taiwan's experience adds to recent developments in the study of parliamentary gender bodies.

In the following sections, I first discuss the literature on gender-sensitive parliaments. Then, I provide a sketch of Taiwan's gender mainstreaming experience, focusing on the critical actors and the creation and expansion of gender policy machineries in the government. After I present how a group of critical actors brought about gender equality reforms within the parliament, I explain why institutional factors constrained them. I argue that creating new institutions had an impact, but the limitations were also clear. Individual MPs and their staff committed to gender equality, but it was not enough. Parliamentary political parties must also adopt the mandate of gender mainstreaming so that a gender-sensitive parliament can become a reachable goal. I conclude the article by pointing out that unless all constitutional branches practice it, gender mainstreaming as a state strategy to promote gender equality will remain challenging.

2. Critical Actors and Gender-Sensitive Parliaments

Research on gender-sensitive parliaments began with Palmieri's work for the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2011 (Palmieri, 2011). The work illustrates essential areas of gender equality reforms in parliament and reports on good practices in various countries. In 2012, the Inter-Parliamentary Union assembly adopted a plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments based on Palmieri's work and listed seven areas for action. Other international government organizations followed suit. The European Institute for Gender Equality established the Gender Sensitive Parliaments Tool in 2018, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe published the Guide for Realizing Gender Equality in Parliament in 2021. These action plans, tools, or guides had two goals, usually: making parliaments gender-equal workplaces and making parliaments' legislative work gender-sensitive. Studies on gender-sensitive parliaments discuss how either one or both goals could or could not be achieved. For the first goal, some studies developed analytical frameworks and indicators to identify how parliaments could be gendered workplaces (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Erikson & Verge, 2022), or how a gendered working environment affected the recruitment of MPs (Miller, 2022). Studies also found that even if MPs wanted parliament to be a more gender-sensitive and family-friendly workplace, they were concerned about the public perception of entitlement (Palmieri & Baker, 2022). Challenges in preventing gender violence and sexual harassment in parliaments were also shared in many countries (Berthet & Kantola, 2021; Collier & Raney, 2018; Raney & Collier, 2022; Erikson & Verge, 2022). For the second goal, studies about how parliament's legislative work could be gender-sensitive tend to treat the issue as part of the gender mainstreaming efforts. Elomäki and Ahrens (2022) studied the European Parliament and found that European Union political groups and standing committees have divergent understandings and practices of gender mainstreaming. Typical rhetoric in resisting implementing gender mainstreaming is the claim that gender is irrelevant to specific policy areas. Palmieri and Baker (2022) discussed the barriers to establishing gender-sensitive parliaments: the lack of political will, the lack of the collection and analysis of quality data, and the lack of a mechanism for gender-sensitive scrutiny. Johnson (2022) and Mousmouti (2022) discussed the importance of ex-ante and post-legislative scrutiny to ensure gender-sensitive legislation. Taiwan's experience in mainstreaming gender has achieved some success toward the first goal, making parliament a friendlier workplace. However, the second goal remains unreachable. Barriers like those described by Palmieri and Baker (2022) also exist in Taiwan, and the scrutiny presented by Johnson (2022) and Mousmouti (2022) does not exist in Taiwan.

Achieving gender-sensitive parliaments requires critical actors committed to mainstreaming gender in parliament. Current literature shows that institutionally, parliamentary committees, parliamentary groups, women's caucuses, or all-party parliamentary groups could be the critical actors that mainstream gender and

substantiate women's political representation in parliament (Freidenvall & Erikson, 2020; Sawer, 2020; Sawer & Turner, 2016). Sawer and Turner (2016) listed the characteristics and constraints of the "gender-focused parliamentary bodies" and treated these groups as part of the success of the women's movement. They also showed that such parliamentary bodies' formation was related to insider instigators—feminists who had entered parliament. But Sawer (2020) argued that the "gender-focused parliamentary bodies" could be precarious; their continuity relied on committed political leaders and support from the women's movement. Freidenvall and Erikson (2020), using the speaker's gender equality group in the Swedish parliament as an example, showed that an informal group could gradually be institutionalized and gain real influence and authority in making the parliament more gender sensitive.

If having a gender-sensitive parliament is the goal, and creating a gender-focused parliamentary body is the tool, then inside instigators are crucial in pursuing the goal and making the tool. Recent gender equality reforms in Taiwan fit this scenario though the newly created institution was not exactly a parliamentary body, as defined by Sawer (2020) and Freidenvall and Erikson (2020). As discussed below, the critical actors in Taiwan encountered almost no opposition to creating a new institution. The challenge was limitations placed on the functioning of the newly created institution and the indifference of most MPs toward gender mainstreaming in parliament.

3. From Mainstreaming the Government to Mainstreaming the Parliament

Gender mainstreaming is an agenda mostly initiated and pushed by the women's movement at the global, national, or local levels. But Taiwan's political isolation shapes the relationship between the women's movement and gender mainstreaming. The country has not been a United Nations member since 1971. When the United Nations held the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, neither the Taiwanese government nor civil society actors were well aware of the resolution on gender mainstreaming. Several years later, when women's movement activists and gender scholars sought to join this new global agenda, the center-left Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was in power. So activists, many of them gender scholars, captured the political opportunity and began pushing the government to practice gender mainstreaming. Though the DPP at that time did not control the parliamentary majority, Taiwan's semi-presidential system afforded the government enough power to implement gender mainstreaming. Before that, in 1997, a cabinet-level gender commission, the Commission on the Promotion of Women's Rights (CPWR), was established when the center-right Nationalist Party (KMT) was in power because of the women's movement's demands. The CPWR, which was comprised of ministers and representatives from women's organizations, was a platform for government members to interact with this NGO commission members. In its first few years, the CPWR met twice a year, and the NGO members made policy suggestions. But the commission did not have a clear direction.

After 2000, when the ruling party became the DPP, the CPWR was more active because more feminist activists became NGO members of the commission. When the activists introduced gender mainstreaming to the government around 2003, the cabinet commission became the main engine for Taiwan's gender mainstreaming. With the help of women's activists, the government established six major tools for gender mainstreaming: gender training, gender analysis, gender statistics, gender impact assessment, gender-responsive budget, and gender policy machinery. Since then, the use of these tools, or the practice of gender mainstreaming, has mainly taken place within the government. The civil servants received gender

training and learned gender analysis, statistics, impact assessment, and budgeting. The gender commission (CPWR), as an organizational model for gender policy machinery, also expanded. Gender mainstreaming became commission-driven because, by the late 2000s, a gender commission was established in every line ministry and every local government. They all followed the same composition principle as the cabinet gender commission, comprising both government and NGO actors and chaired by the highest executive officer of that ministry or government. These gender commissions opened up institutional space for women's organizations to participate in government decision-making, but the participation of women's movement activists was a key factor.

The extent to which the national government, a ministry, or a local government took gender mainstreaming seriously largely depended on how the NGO members in the gender commissions utilized their social capital. Hwang and Wu (2016) found that many of those who served as gender commissioners in the mid-2000s, when the center-left DPP was in power, knew one another from their participation in the women's movement and the trust and comradeship among them became important social capital when they became the cabinet gender commissioners. They shared the value of gender equality and took collective stands, if necessary, in commission meetings. Hwang (2020) also found that the NGO members in the gender commission of a local government could help withstand the commission's setbacks when the mayor was not gender sensitive.

When feminists wanted to mainstream gender in parliament, they first created a similar gender commission in the parliament. In 2012, a renowned feminist activist and lawyer (interviewee A), who had experience as an NGO member of the cabinet gender commissioner, was elected a party-list MP of the DPP. Interviewee B had previously worked with interviewee A in a feminist organization, and she entered the parliament as a staff member of interviewee A. They soon discovered that few people in parliament were familiar with gender mainstreaming, whether MPs, staff members of MPs, or civil servants. Interviewee A successfully motioned to establish a Gender Equality Task Force within the parliament. The task force's composition principle was similar to those of gender equality commissions in the government, with heads of the administrative units of the parliament as civil servant members and women's activists or gender scholars as NGO members. The task force chair was the general secretary of the parliament, the highest-ranking civil servant in the parliament.

This task force did not include MPs, and its guidelines focused on making parliament a more gender-friendly workplace. The task force's establishment encountered little opposition partially because it only aimed to mainstream gender in parliament's administrative units, and approximately 60 percent of the civil servants who worked in these administrative units were women (Legislative Yuan, 2024). Between 2012 and 2016, when the center-right KMT controlled the parliamentary majority, and the house speaker was a KMT member, the Gender Equality Task Force provided gender training for civil servants in the parliament mainly through lectures and discussion sessions. All lectures and discussion sessions were open to the MPs and their staff, but few attended (interviewee A). But interviewees A and B wanted MPs to get involved. In 2016, their opportunity came when the DPP controlled the parliamentary majority, and the house speaker was a DPP member. The idea of mainstreaming gender in the parliament also gained support from the new house speaker who also had experience in the cabinet gender commission. In the mid-2000s, when feminist activists introduced gender mainstreaming to the government, the house speaker was the Minister of Interior, serving as a government member in the cabinet gender commission. Therefore, he was familiar with and supported the agenda (interviewee A).

In 2016, the parliament's Gender Equality Task Force was reorganized into the GEC. The commission chair was the house speaker, each parliamentary party had MP members, and NGO members were still included. The commission had more power than the task force since it had MPs as members. Gender equality reforms were carried out by the newly created commission in the parliament, but the commission's limitations were also clear. The commission's establishment guidelines included making the parliament a gender-friendly workplace and providing consultation and policy recommendations to the parliament to ensure gender equality value in the legislative process. But the latter function never got underway.

4. Critical Issues in Gender Equality Reforms

A gender-sensitive parliament, as the above-mentioned action plans or guidelines of major international organizations show, includes two dimensions: making the parliament a gender-friendly workplace and making the legislative process a gender-sensitive process. The GEC in Taiwan's parliament only tackled work in the first dimension. After the GEC was established, the commission soon had resolutions on establishing childcare facilities and conducting sexual harassment surveys within the parliament. The former was quickly completed, though few MPs needed it. The latter aimed to strengthen the sexual harassment prevention mechanism within the parliament, but the reform was limited only to the prevention mechanism for civil servants in parliament.

Establishing a childcare center was the parliament's first gender equality reform. It was formed in response to Wan-ru Yu's attempt to bring her baby into the meeting chamber discussed above. She proposed a bill to change the parliamentary rules regarding the meeting chambers. The bill would allow children two years of age or younger to be brought into the meeting chamber if their MP or bureaucrat parent(s) needed to care for them while attending parliamentary meetings. The bill also cited the Australia lower house's rule to allow babies to be fed in the meeting chamber of the parliament as an example. When Yu stated her intention to propose the bill, she emphasized that raising a child was not a private matter of an individual woman. She candidly said that the purpose was not to bring babies into the meeting chamber per se because, as a mother of a young child, she was not sure that the environment of the meeting chamber, busy and sometimes noisy, was good for babies or small children. She wanted to show that achieving work and family balance needed institutional change, and the bill was just one small step to reducing the barrier (Zhonghua mInguo lifayuan gongbao, 2016).

Before Yu's bill was deliberated, the parliament's Personnel Department responded by planning to establish a childcare center within the parliament. The plan began before the Gender Equality Task Force was reorganized into the GEC. The GEC's meeting minutes showed that during the first commission meeting, MPs from both the DPP and the KMT were concerned about the center's progress. The center was established in early 2017; however, MPs' childcare needs were limited because by the time they became MPs most had already passed the child-rearing age. Women MPs sometimes entered politics only because they no longer need to care about their children (Huang, 2023). Figure 1 shows the average age of MPs over the past 25 years, which actually increased.

Establishing the childcare center in the parliament got much media attention, though the center did not have enough children to care for at the beginning. Interviewee C is an NGO member of the parliament's GEC. She worked as an MP's staff member before becoming the general secretary of a major feminist organization specializing in care policies. According to interviewee C, many Taiwanese parents send their kids to
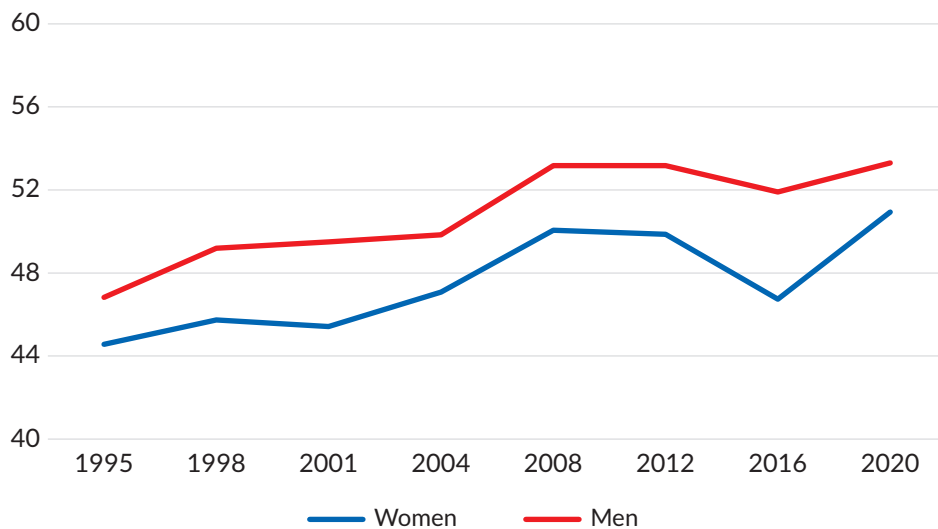
Figure 1. Average age of the Taiwanese MPs. Source: Central Election Commission (n.d.).

neighborhood childcare facilities instead of workplace childcare facilities. Even though the center accepted the children or grandchildren of MPs, staff members, civil servants who worked in the parliament, and journalists who reported on the parliament, there were still not enough children in the childcare center. The center ended up accepting children from families who lived in the parliament's surrounding area. Despite all these issues, a childcare facility in a legislature is still an important symbolic function for women's substantive representation (Verge, 2022), and it could be regarded as a facility that anticipates future needs.

The second parliamentary gender equality reform was strengthening the sexual harassment prevention mechanism. Interviewee B mentioned that not long after she entered the parliament as interviewee A's staff member, another MP's staff from their own party sought her advice on how to file a sexual harassment complaint. Because of interviewees A and B's credentials in the women's movement, interviewee A's staff heard about sexual harassment cases more often than other MPs' staff members. When interviewee B wanted to help the person who sought her advice, she realized that the parliament lacked a clear procedure for filing sexual harassment complaints. Because sexual harassment cases were often heard through whisper networks, interviewee A asked the parliament's Personnel Department to conduct a sexual harassment survey. Survey questionnaires were distributed widely in 2017. Those who received the questionnaires included staff members of MPs, civil servants, contract workers, cleaning ladies, guards, and so on. The questionnaire was published on the parliament's website, under the category "Gender Equality Zone," but the survey results were not made public. Interviewee C suggested that the Personnel Department was likely to believe that if the survey results showed many unreported cases of sexual harassment, it meant that they had not been doing their job right in preventing sexual harassment in parliament. But the Personnel Department used the survey results as a reference to make the complaints filing system clearer and more straightforward (interviewees A and B). The problem is that this filing system cannot be used by MPs or their staff.

The filing system issues derived from Taiwan's laws. Taiwan has three different laws governing sexual harassment prevention. Schools are required by the Gender Equity Education Act to investigate sexual harassment complaints if a student is involved, whether as an offender or a victim. Employers are required

by the Gender Equality Employment Act to investigate sexual harassment complaints if the offender was an employee or the harassment took place under a work-related circumstance. All other cases should be handled by the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, which is usually the most difficult to mobilize because it requires the victim to file a complaint in the city or county government where the sexual harassment took place. These laws make sexual harassment prevention in parliament a complicated matter because if a person is harassed, whether they can file a complaint with the parliament's Sexual Harassment Review Committee depends on their identity and the offender's identity. Neither MPs nor their staff members, if being harassed, could file complaints with the parliament's Sexual Harassment Review Committee because the parliament is not their employer. The committee only handles cases that are filed by parliament employees, including civil servants, interns, and dispatched workers who work in the parliament's administrative units. MPs' staff members are excluded because their employers are individual MPs.

According to the parliamentary regulation, each MP can have 8 to 14 staff members and the parliament pays their salaries. The parliament provides a fixed amount of money for MPs to hire their staff members. MPs decide how many staff members they want to hire, and they also decide the salary for each staff member, as long as the total amount does not exceed an established limit. Though the parliament pays the staff members with the parliament's budget, the Ministry of Labor regards individual MPs as the employers in defining the employment relations of MPs' staff members. This definition affects how sexual harassment cases are handled. If a staff member is harassed in the parliament or under the circumstances that she is fulfilling her job duty, she should file a complaint with the MP she works for. The MP's office is supposed to respond to the staff member's complaint to fulfill their employer's duty.

It is understandable that, with such a sexual harassment prevention mechanism, few staff members seek redress for sexual harassment they experience in the parliament. According to interviewees A and B, many MPs relied on their senior staff members for support, and these senior staff members are usually men. Women staff members who have less power would be reluctant to come forward if senior staff members harassed them. The harassment could also come from donors or campaign volunteers who support the MPs (Tseng, 2022). Parliament liaison officers from ministries or government agencies could also be vulnerable because they need MPs' support for their ministries' bills. When these officers were harassed by MPs or staff members of MPs, they seldom reported the harassment to their supervisors or filed complaints in their ministries because they did not want their supervisors to feel that they could not handle the job of being a liaison officer (interviewee A).

When MPs were harassed, they could not file complaints within parliament. In Dalton's study about sexual harassment in Japanese politics, she pointed out that legislative assemblies in many countries "do not fit well inside the conceptual boundaries of 'workplace'" (Dalton, 2021, p. 155). Thus, victims of sexual harassment in Japanese politics found it hard to file complaints. The Taiwanese situation is different because Taiwan has a law, the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, for those who are not covered by laws regarding workplace sexual harassment. The problem is, as mentioned above, that this law is difficult to mobilize. Interviewee D is a current MP, and she was elected in January 2024 for her second term as a party-list MP of the DPP. During her first term, a KMT male MP inappropriately jostled her when MPs from both parties fought for the podium in front of the house speaker's seat. At first, she openly complained about the inappropriate behavior because he used his belly to bump her back. She decided to formally file a complaint when that male MP and his staff members made further inappropriate remarks, such as "a belly would not impregnate a

woman" or "she should look in the mirror." Interviewee E was also a KMT party-list MP when the incident happened. Like interviewee D, she was a college professor and participated in women's organizations before she entered parliament. She thought jostling was not unusual in parliament, but she agreed that those remarks were inappropriate. Interviewee D eventually filed a sexual harassment complaint against that KMT male MP in the Taipei City government because the parliament did not employ her, so the parliament's Sexual Harassment Review Committee could not handle her complaint. The Taipei City government's sexual harassment prevention committee, after investigation, found her complaint valid. She also filed a suit against that male MP and won. Though she was redressed by both the Taipei City government and the court, she said that the process was taxing in both monetary and non-monetary terms (interviewee D).

In the summer of 2023, Taiwan experienced a belated #MeToo wave (Chen & Huang, 2023). The country was quiet when other countries experienced the #MeToo wave in 2017 and 2018 (Chen, 2021; Huang, 2021). After the wave broke out, the DPP government quickly submitted bills to the parliament to revise the three laws governing sexual harassment, partially because the breaking case took place inside the DPP. The bills clarified and increased penalties for power-based harassment and the revisions were passed in the parliament at the end of July 2023. The newly revised laws would go into effect on March 8, 2024, to celebrate International Women's Day. However, the revised laws still did not require parliament to have a sexual harassment prevention mechanism covering MPs. Interviewee D decided to solve the problem by demanding parliament change its codes of conduct for MPs. She held a press conference before International Women's Day and called it ironic that the codes of conduct for MPs in the parliament did not include articles on sexual harassment. She called for the Discipline Committee, one of the ad hoc committees in the parliament with MPs from each parliamentary party as members of the committee, to include sexual harassment as a disciplinary issue. She said the DPP incorporated her suggestion into the party's parliamentary reform proposals. When and to what extent her efforts would have fruitful results remains to be seen. But this direction, treating sexual harassment as an issue of codes of conduct, has been the institutional response in many countries for elected assemblies where workplace regulations on sexual harassment do not cover elected politicians (Dalton, 2021).

While establishing the childcare center and strengthening the sexual harassment prevention mechanism were efforts to make the parliament a more gender-sensitive workplace, the parliament's GEC's impact was limited because most MPs, except the few critical actors, were hardly involved with the commission's work. The parliament's GEC looks like a "gender-focused parliamentary body," as Sawer (2020) or Freidenvall and Erikson (2020) noted, but not quite. Major institutional constraints limited the commission's function and impact.

First, the GEC was created by the critical actors to mainstream gender in parliament, but institutionally it could only mainstream gender in the administrative units of the parliament. The critical actors, especially interviewee A, wanted the GEC to be like the gender commission in the cabinet, so that the cabinet gender commission would affect government policies, and the parliament's gender commission would affect parliament's legislation. Though the house speaker chaired the parliament's gender commission like the premier chaired the cabinet's gender commission, the difference was obvious and significant. The premier could direct ministers, but the house speakers could not direct MPs and their staff. The GEC could direct the parliament's Personnel Department to provide gender-mainstreaming training for civil servants who worked in the parliament, but they had no power to demand MPs or their staff to attend those training

sessions though all those sessions were open to MPs and their staff members (interviewees A, B, C, D, and E).

The commission's position in the parliament structure is best illustrated on the parliament's website. It is placed under the column of the parliament's Personnel Department and has no institutional relation with the parliament's standing committees. According to interviewee A, besides the one or two DPP women MPs who cared about gender equality, only the house speaker and the outside experts, the NGO members of the commission, regularly attended the meetings. MPs from other political parties usually signed the attendance sheets and left. Interviewee E attributed MPs' indifference toward this commission to its powerlessness. She argued that politicians were usually busy, especially those elected in the district tier. They would not invest time and energy in an institution with little or no power over the legislative process.

Interviewees A, B, and C all thought the parliament's GEC could impact the legislative process, but it would take time. Interviewee A often used the commission's meeting time to educate civil servants in the parliament's administrative units on gender equality concepts, especially for those who worked in the parliament's Bureau of Laws and Statutes or Budget Center. The Bureau of Laws and Statutes routinely reviewed whether bills proposed by MPs were unconstitutional or in conflict with existing laws, and the Budget Center routinely wrote budget analysis. Interviewee A figured that if these civil servants could be more gender-sensitive, then it helped gender-mainstreaming work because the Bureau of Laws and Statutes' review could incorporate gender impact analysis, and the Budge Center's analysis could utilize the concept of a gender-responsive budget. Interviewees B and C echoed interviewee A's opinions. According to them, the analyses provided by the Bureau of Laws and Statutes or the Budget Center were underutilized by most MPs, and those analyses should have a greater impact on MPs' legislative deliberations. If those analyses were gender-sensitive, the legislative process would be more gender-sensitive. These expectations ironically showed that the commission's work had no direct impact on the legislative process, and it has not been institutionally linked to the legislative process. The meeting minutes showed that an NGO member of the commission, a renowned lawyer, motioned in the commission meetings about revisions or enactment of certain laws. She actually provided extensive written comments on laws and bills. Her analyses, however, were not even delivered to MPs like those written by the Bureau of Laws and Statutes and the Budget Center.

Second, MPs who served as members of the GEC were recommended by their parties, regardless of their qualifications. Though political parties tended to send MPs who cared about gender equality to the commission, there were no clear guidelines or regulations about the qualifications of commission members. Interviewee D once motioned in a commission meeting to disqualify a KMT female MP as a commission member because that MP mishandled a sexual assault case in which the director of her office assaulted a volunteer for her campaign after they drank together. The victim then asked for help from interviewee D's office. The commission did not reach a resolution to disqualify that MP based on the guideline that commission members were decided by every party caucus and the party caucus' decision should be respected. This differs from the Swedish Speaker's Gender Equality Group described by Freidenvall and Erikson (2020). Though that group was informal, the group members were invited by the house speaker, so eventually this informal group could exert real influence. This contrasts with the Taiwanese experience since the parliament's GEC was a formal institution with limited influence.

Third, MPs who care about gender mainstreaming in parliament are party-list MPs with term limits. Taiwan's electoral system is a mixed-member majoritarian system, and, conventionally, MPs elected in the single-member districts are more powerful than those elected through party lists. Most importantly, parliamentary parties all imposed term limits for their party-list MPs, except for the house speaker. The term limit is usually one or two terms (four or eight years) for each party-list MP. Both interviewee A and interviewee E are former MPs. Interviewee A served two terms and interviewee E served one term. The critical actors in mainstreaming gender in the parliament are mostly party-list MPs and their staff members, meaning their work needs others to continue. Interviewee D became a DPP party-list MP after interviewee A finished her terms. Continuity exists between them since they both were active in the women's movement and served on the board of the same women's organization before they entered parliament. But it is difficult to know how and whether the continuity would exist between interviewee D and future DPP party-list MPs when she finished her terms in parliament. In other words, the continuity of the critical actors' work is very much based on individual MPs' commitment, despite the existence of the GEC.

5. The Missing Actors: Political Parties

The Taiwanese parliament has enacted laws improving gender equality over the past three decades since the country democratized in the late 1980s. Most laws were enacted before the establishment of the parliament's GEC. Whether it was the revision of civil codes or penal codes to remove patriarchal elements in the laws (in the 1980s and 1990s) or the enactment of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (in 1998), the Gender Equality Employment Act (in 2002), the Gender Equity Education Act (in 2004), the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act (in 2005), the Act for Implementation of Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 748 (virtually Taiwan's Same-Sex Marriage Act after the ruling of the Judicial Juan, Taiwan's Constitutional Court, in 2019), or the Stalking and Harassment Prevention Act (in 2021), these laws shared similar patterns. Women's organizations either helped draft the bills for the government or presented the draft bills to friendly MPs who submitted the bills as private bills. Except for the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, all major laws regarding gender equality were enacted when the government, and not necessarily the parliament, was controlled by the center-left DPP.

Though gender mainstreaming was adopted under the DPP government in the early 2000s, when there was a government change in 2008 and the center-right KMT won the presidential and general elections, the government continued its gender mainstreaming efforts (Huang, 2017). The decision to do gender impact assessments for major law revisions and major policies was made under a KMT premier in 2009. While both major parties, when each controlled the government, engaged in gender mainstreaming, neither party practiced gender mainstreaming in their own party or the parliament. At the end of May 2023, when the belated #MeToo wave broke out in Taiwan, the DPP's deputy general secretary mishandled the case when she was the director of the party's Department of Women's Affairs. After other cases appeared, the DPP, under a new director of the Department of Women's Affairs, apologized and promised to strengthen the sexual harassment prevention mechanism within the party and to revise the laws to increase penalties for offenders of power-based sexual harassment. Compared to the KMT, the DPP prides itself on supporting gender equality. The #MeToo wave was embarrassing, and it also showed the lack of gender mainstreaming within the party. For the KMT, during the #MeToo wave, a senior politician, the KMT's parliamentary party caucus leader, was named by a journalist as an offender. The KMT soon declared that they found no

evidence of the offense. Whether the KMT strengthened the party's sexual harassment prevention mechanism was unclear, and the party did not publicly commit to gender mainstreaming either.

Interviewees A, B, C, and D were, and still are, critical actors in Taiwan's gender mainstreaming in government and parliament, but they had little influence within the DPP. Before interviewees A and D became MPs, they were a lawyer and college professor, respectively. Interviewees B and C worked as women's movement activists before and after they went into the parliament as DPP MPs' staff. None had any experience working within the DPP or held any DPP party office. Interviewee E's relationship with the KMT was similar. She was a college professor and a women's movement activist before she became an MP. She also had no experience working or holding office within the KMT. These critical actors are insiders of the parliament because they have all worked for parliament before, but their influence in their own parties is limited. The most important decision-making bodies in both parties are the Central Standing Committees, and no critical actor has ever been a member. The house speaker who supported the GEC's formation was powerful within the party, but his support remained within the scope of having the commission's focus of its work on civil servants (interviewee A). His successor, also a senior DPP politician, held the same attitude. Interviewee D once suggested in the commission meeting that MPs and staff members should be able to file sexual harassment complaints with the parliament's Sexual Harassment Review Committee, but the house speaker disagreed. The picture was clear. The MPs most committed to gender mainstreaming in the parliament had no power to make the party care about gender mainstreaming, and those who had power were indifferent or supportive within clear limits.

6. Conclusion

Gender mainstreaming in Taiwan was initiated by women's movement activists who successfully persuaded the government to adopt the agenda. The parliament was not involved until recently, when some activists became MPs and staff members. They attempted to copy their experience in working with the government on gender mainstreaming to the parliament, and their success was limited. The challenges critical actors faced that aimed to mainstream gender in the parliament showed gender mainstreaming as a state strategy to promote gender equality has not been a shared goal among political elites.

The parliament's GEC has made the parliament a more gender-friendly workplace, but it had no power over issues concerning MPs' rights or responsibilities. The childcare center was established and has had an inclusive policy of admitting children for anyone who works at parliament. But the sexual harassment prevention mechanism was strengthened mainly for civil servants who worked in parliament. Issues such as online voting, online participation in parliamentary meetings, or parental leave for MPs have not been discussed in the GEC since it has no influence over these issues. These issues are obviously important if the parliament is going to be a gender-friendly or family-friendly workplace, but there is no sign of when and how, or if ever, these issues will be discussed in the parliament.

Enacting laws that reduce gender discrimination or promote gender equality, as the Taiwanese parliament has done over the decades, is certainly positive. But that is not equivalent to gender mainstreaming in the legislative process. Gender sensitivity in the legislative process requires consistent institutional efforts, such as utilizing gender mainstreaming tools to ensure all laws, not only gender-related laws, are gender-friendly. No institution, formal or informal, in the Taiwanese parliament is making such efforts. Compared to the

government's gender policy machineries, gender sensitivity training, gender statistics, and gender impact assessment, the parliament did not use or underutilized these tools.

To what extent has the executive branch's conventional dominance over the decision-making process resulted in other constitutional branches' indifference toward gender mainstreaming? This is a question worth exploring, but it is beyond the scope of this article. One thing is clear: Unless all constitutional branches practice it, gender mainstreaming, as a state strategy to promote or ensure gender equality, still has a long way to go.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The author had prior acquaintance with all the interviewees before the interviews. Two of the interviewees were fellow directors of the board of a women's organization in which the author has participated.

Data Availability

Data regarding the organization and regulations of Taiwan's parliament is available at: https://www.ly.gov.tw/Home/Index.aspx

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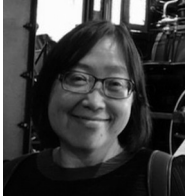
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ARTICLE

Autocratic Genderwashing: Gender-Equality Reforms in Serbia

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Abstract

While gender equality is usually linked with democracy, autocratic regimes frequently take the lead in such reforms. Focusing on the case of Serbia, this article demonstrates how gender equality reforms can be used as instruments of autocratic regimes. As electoral autocracies nowadays depend on international legitimation and support, they need to present a democratic image to the international audience. Very often they achieve this by introducing gender-sensitive policies and increasing the public visibility of women. This study shows that the democratic backsliding evidenced in Serbia since 2016 has been followed by increased attention to gender equality. In recent years, the Serbian parliament has increased the gender quota for national and local parliaments to 40% and passed several important pieces of legislation, including the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence (2016) and the Gender Equality Law (2021). Additionally, the regime has appointed a record number of women to executive government positions. Since 2017, Serbia has had a lesbian woman serving as a prime minister and the government formed in 2020 was labelled a "women's government," with 40% of ministerial positions held by women. This article argues that the regime tends to adopt these democratic reforms while, at the same time, manipulating their meaning to advance a conservative agenda and bolster anti-gender mobilizations. These different—often contradictory—strategies help the regime address a variety of audiences—both international and domestic—and gain their recognition.

Keywords

autocratic genderwashing; electoral autocracy; gender equality; instrumentalization of women's rights; Serbia

1. Introduction

Gender equality reforms are commonly associated with democracy. One way by which to differentiate democratic from non-democratic countries is by looking at the protections they provide for human and minority rights. The process of autocratization in many countries such as Russia and Turkey has been

followed by an erosion of women's rights. However, recent literature suggests that many autocracies, particularly electoral autocracies, are increasingly implementing gender equality reforms in greater numbers than democracies (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015). For instance, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) suggest that among the 75 states with electoral gender quotas, approximately two-thirds (51) are governed by various autocratic regimes. These countries, among others, include Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Serbia. While these emerging trends have still been insufficiently explored, there is growing evidence that autocrats may well instrumentalize gender equality for international image management purposes (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Donno et al., 2022; Tripp, 2023). One underlying reason for this is that every country in the world today wants to be seen as democratic. By introducing gender equality reforms, autocratic regimes can, at least for a while, maintain the illusion of democracy even in the face of electoral and media freedom violations.

However, this literature is still very new and numerous questions remain unanswered. We still know little about the specific strategies these regimes use and the on-the-ground effects of gender equality reforms. Looking at the case of the competitive authoritarian regime in Serbia, this article sheds light on how the regime twists these reforms into its own instrument, subverting their potentially positive effects in the process. While these reforms are typically viewed through a democratic lens, this study argues that they can also serve as a façade, following the genderwashing literature. However, since political elites have diverse audiences, both their intentions and the messages they send are often more complex and sometimes even controversial. This article explores these complexities to understand better the when, how, and why of gender equality reforms in competitive authoritarian regimes.

2. Gender Equality Reforms and International Reputation

In democracies, gender equality reforms tend to be perceived as a result of the strong influence of women's movements, which lobby for change. Conversely, in autocratic regimes where civil society is repressed, such reforms can rarely come from the grassroots level (Donno et al., 2022). In these contexts, gender equality policies tend to be initiated from the top down. Researchers are increasingly intrigued by the reasons why authoritarian regimes choose to adopt such reforms. Donno et al. (2022) argue that this cannot merely be explained by their different starting points, whereby, democracies have already achieved certain levels of gender equality. Instead, they suggest that countries with higher levels of women's rights tend to adopt more gender-related laws.

The literature offers at least two explanations for the rise of gender equality policies in autocracies. One explanation revolves around internal legitimation, where the regime seeks women's support to maintain its power (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Lorch & Bunk, 2016). Women's rights policies enable the regime to co-opt women, as they may fear that any regime change could lead to a decline in their newly acquired rights. Recent research suggests that political opposition in electoral autocracies tends to be less supportive of gender-related reforms once these reforms are embraced by the regime, as they are reluctant to legitimize autocratic leaders (Noh et al., 2023). Prioritizing women's empowerment, women's groups may worry that the fall of the regime could result in the abolishment of gender-related legislation.

Another explanation relates to external legitimation and reputation (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Donno et al., 2022; Tripp, 2019, 2023). Electoral autocracies use a range of tactics to influence their international

reputation because (a) they often depend on international aid and (b) they face diverse pressures (such as shaming) if they fail to comply with international norms (Escribe-Folsch & Wright, 2015). Since the end of the Cold War, democracy has emerged as a fundamental value in the international community and a country's international reputation is closely tied to its democratization efforts. There are two potential reasons for gender equality corresponding well with these goals. First, most democracy promotion programs nowadays include support for gender equality and many assessments of democracy, such as Freedom House and V-Dem, include gender equality among their democracy indicators. Since gender equality has been included in the liberal peace and state-building packages, countries subjected to these directed liberalizations are particularly incentivized to perceive gender equality as a reputation-building instrument. Second, gender equality has become increasingly viewed as a field in which countries can showcase compliance and boost their democratic reputation without significant survival risks for the regime. Unlike initiatives promoting political pluralism, combating corruption, or granting media freedom, which can pose threats to a regime's stability, gender equality reforms are perceived as less risky, and thus serve as a viable substitute for more costly reforms. Recent literature characterizes these reforms as "autocratic genderwashing," i.e., an autocratic regime's tool for constructing its democratic image while at the same time drawing the focus away from ongoing authoritarian practices (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022).

While international image management has increasingly been used as an explanation for gender equality reforms in non-democracies, there is still insufficient empirical evidence as to either the motivations of the regimes for adopting these reforms or the reforms' effects. Recent literature suggests that such regimes, particularly in Africa, opt for quota adoption as this is perceived as one of the least costly strategies for their authoritarian image management (Tripp, 2023; Valdini, 2019). Using a survey experiment with citizens of Sweden and the US, Bush & Zetterberg (2021) found that electoral gender quotas indeed boost a country's reputation for democracy and increase access to foreign aid. In contrast, exploring how international audiences perceive gender equality reforms in electoral autocracies, Bush et al. (2023) found that while quotas increase the perceived level of democracy, they have a limited impact on international support for foreign aid. They argue that other reforms, such as those related to women's economic rights, have more positive effects on both a country's reputation and support for aid, while at the same time diverting attention from issues such as media control or restrictions on political freedoms. Similarly, Donno et al. (2022) suggest that laws addressing violence against women, in addition to gender economic reforms, represent the most effective strategy for increasing international support for foreign aid. Analysing variations in women's share of cabinet seats in 38 African countries under authoritarian rule between 1973 and 2013, Kang and Kroeger (2022) identified a strong correlation in recent years between an increase in the number of women in the cabinets of electoral autocracies and the inflow of foreign aid.

While this emerging literature establishes a correlation between particular reforms and foreign aid or international reputation, many questions remain open. Political elites may have complex motivations for their decisions, which need to be unpacked more systemically. Even if increases in foreign aid and reputational boosts are the only motivations behind gender equality reforms, which reforms actually produce these intended effects? There is also a lack of understanding regarding the meanings constructed around gender equality, how adopted laws are interpreted by regime representatives, and how their meanings change depending on the audience. So far, existing literature has suggested that such policies are rarely implemented (Htun & Jensenius, 2020), but their effects on gender equality in society remain insufficiently explored.

In addition, there has been a lack of research as to when these reforms are adopted, at which specific moments, and under what circumstances genderwashing is chosen as a strategy. Arat (2022) has demonstrated that the "when and how" depend on a regime's goals across different political stages. For instance, when Erdoğan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey and wanted to legitimize its rule in a secular context, they expanded liberal laws on women's rights. However, as they solidified their rule and started democratic backsliding, they reinterpreted the previously adopted liberal reforms to promote conservative ideologies. Finally, as the regime delved deeper into autocratic rule, they dismantled egalitarian institutions and replaced them with conservative alternatives (Arat, 2022). Looking at the case of a competitive authoritarian regime in Serbia, this article aims to fill some of these gaps in the literature on autocratic genderwashing by exploring the when, how, and why of gender equality reforms in greater depth. The following sections demonstrate how the regime can employ these varied, and at times contradictory, strategies simultaneously, directing them towards different audiences.

3. Competitive Authoritarianism in Serbia

Serbia is a good case for studying autocratic genderwashing due to its rapid slide into autocracy since 2012 and its strong dependence on international legitimation. The country started its transition from competitive authoritarianism under Slobodan Milošević to democracy in 2000. Following the wars and international sanctions of the 1990s, the early 2000s were marked by Serbia's reintegration into the international community under a liberal state-building framework (Džuverović & Milošević, 2021). By 2006, Serbia was ranked as a semi-consolidated liberal democracy (V-Dem, 2023). The democratic backsliding began once again in 2012 when Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)—formed in 2009 through a split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party—rose to power (Spasojević & Lončar, 2023). Trying to distance themselves from their radical past, the party leadership adopted more moderate and pro-EU positions. Vučić emerged as the party's prominent figure and its most popular politician, displaying strong inclinations toward centralizing power and personalizing politics (Spasojević, 2021). These tendencies persisted through subsequent snap parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2016 and presidential elections in 2017, signalling the onset of a crisis of electoral democracy in Serbia. This crisis reached its peak with the opposition's parliamentary boycott in 2019, followed by the boycott of general elections in 2020, with concerns regarding unfair electoral conditions being raised by both international and domestic organizations (CRTA, 2020; OSCE, 2020).

In addition, the regime relies on the media control it successfully established by employing subtle coercion, financial incentives through advertising, and the outright purchase of media outlets (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). The influence of civil society has been reduced to a token procedural role, marginalized, and sidelined from meaningful participation (Lončar, 2021). Since 2019, Serbia has unanimously been ranked as a hybrid regime and electoral autocracy (Freedom House, 2023; V-Dem, 2023). Additionally, existing democracy reports indicate that Serbia, alongside Turkey and Hungary, is among the countries experiencing the most significant declines in democracy (Hellmeier et al., 2021).

International support has played a significant role in fortifying Vučić's position. His previous portrayal as a firm-handed minister of information during Milošević's regime in the 1990s required a reshaping of his image, rendering him more susceptible to external pressures. Vučić was compelled to reaffirm his allegiance to the West and his determination to lead Serbia towards European Union integration, which started in 2008 and is deemed irreversible. Although international influence has not been strong enough to forestall

democratic regression, maintaining international legitimacy has remained essential to the regime, particularly due to Serbia's economic dependence on the West. In contrast to public opinion surveys, which show that the citizens of Serbia tend to believe that China and Russia provide the country with the most aid, data shows that the Serbian economy is heavily dependent on the EU (Kowalski, 2021). The EU is by far the greatest investor in and trade partner to Serbia, accounting for 62% of Serbia's total trade. In addition, the EU's annual foreign aid to Serbia is higher than the aid received from all other countries combined. Other major providers of development aid to Serbia include Germany, the US, the United Arab Emirates, the UN, and other Western European countries (Hartwell & Sidlo, 2017). On the one hand, these strong ties with the EU have prevented more blatant forms of autocratization; on the other, the EU has chosen to turn a blind eye to Serbia's considerable democratic shortcomings in exchange for stability in the region (Bieber, 2017). Vučić's cooperative approach during negotiations with Kosovo (2013, 2021–2024) and the migrant crisis (2015–2016) have demonstrated that Serbia can be a factor for stability in the Balkans. The following sections demonstrate that gender equality reforms represent an additional area where the regime has tried to boost its legitimacy.

4. Research Design and Methods

Previous research has shown that initial reforms during the democratization phase in Serbia (2000–2011) were a result of a vocal campaign and pressures from civil society, namely women's organizations (Nacevska & Lokar, 2017) and feminist voices within political parties (Lončar, 2023). In addition, they also represented an effort to harmonize the country's laws with EU legislation (Lončar, 2023). In this phase, Serbia adopted several major reforms, including a 30% electoral gender quota in 2002 for local elections and in 2004 for the national parliament (see Figure 1). The 2002 Criminal Code listed for the first time domestic violence as an explicit criminal offence. The parliament further adopted the first Law on the Equality of Sexes in 2009 and the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in 2009. These laws significantly increased women's presence in representative institutions, but implementation of anti-discrimination laws remained minimal (Slootmaeckers, 2022).

Democratization phase

2002

Amendments to the Criminal Code: domestic violence listed for the first time explicity as a criminal offense

30% gender quota for local parliaments

2009

The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination
The Law on the Equality of Sexes

30% gender quotas for national parliament

2004

Figure 1. Main gender equality reforms in Serbia during its democratization phase (2000–2011).

However, we still lack empirical evidence on both the actors and motivations behind the gender equality reforms after 2012, i.e., during its autocratization phase. To explore the how, when, and why of gender equality reforms during the autocratization phase in Serbia, the analysis takes several steps.

First, the key reforms in this period were identified (see Figure 2). One group of reforms addressed violence against women. The parliament ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) and also adopted the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence. Under Vučić's rule, Serbia has made additional improvements in the area of political representation. In June 2017, Vučić appointed Ana Brnabić as prime minister, a newcomer to politics with no party affiliations. She held this position until the parliamentary elections in December 2023. Brnabić's main quality, as Vučić suggested, was that she was an openly lesbian woman. Brnabić's appointment marked a historic moment as she became the first woman and the first lesbian person to hold such a prestigious office in Serbia, and only the fifth openly gay prime minister in the world. In 2019, she further made history as the first openly gay prime minister to have a same-sex partner give birth while in office. In 2020, Serbia raised the electoral gender quota to 40%, intending to achieve gender parity in politics. Following the 2020 general elections, Serbia formed a "women's government," with a female gay prime minister and 10 out of 23 ministerial positions held by women. Finally, in 2021 Serbia adopted several amendments to the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and the long-awaited Law on Gender Equality, signalling a broader focus beyond biological differences between sexes, and addressing not only formal equality between men and women but also considering gender-based discrimination and inequalities faced by individuals of diverse gender identities. The Law on Gender Equality now guarantees equal participation and representation and provides legal tools for preventing gender-based violence and discrimination in various areas. It further mandates the use of gender-sensitive language in public institutions and the media.

Second, since all these reforms were adopted by the parliament, the empirical analysis focuses primarily on parliamentary debates during which these specific reforms were discussed and passed. These debates serve as a crucial source of information, offering insight into the rationale behind proposed reforms, providing justifications and presenting arguments both for and against their adoption to the public. Third, most of these reforms were announced by the president during media conferences before entering parliamentary procedures. To better understand the motivations behind this, a content analysis was conducted on these
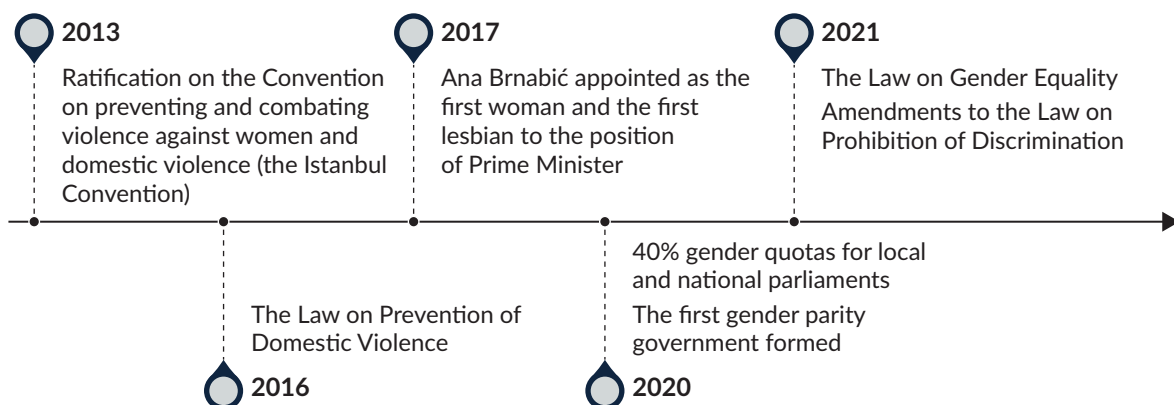

Figure 2. Main gender equality reforms in Serbia during its autocratization phase (2012–2024).

speeches. Fourth, the article looks at the main gender equality indexes and the European Commission's reporting on Serbia's progress in this field to explore the effects of the reforms: Were they effective in increasing reputation, and to what extent? The final step in the analysis addresses timing: When were these reforms adopted and how did this relate to the key moments in Serbia's autocratization process?

5. Gender Equality Reforms as a Cloak: Twisting Gender Equality Into an Instrument of Authoritarian Image Management

Answering the question of why political actors propose and adopt certain reforms is challenging to say the least, because their motives are often complex, different actors involved may have divergent perspectives, and very often these actors' motives remain unspoken. However, looking at their claims can help us to at least partially understand their motivations.

President Vučić's media conferences suggest that international reputation was a dominant motive for the appointment of a female prime minister in 2017 and the formation of a gender parity government in 2021. Announcing his decision to propose Ana Brnabić as a candidate for the prime ministerial position to the National Assembly, president Vučić offered the following explanation as a main reason for choosing an at-the-time non-partisan individual for such a high position:

> I am convinced that in the coming period it is important to ensure the further strengthening of Serbia's reputation in the international community, both in the West and in the East, both on the path of European integration, which remains the strategic goal of the Republic of Serbia, and in relations with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the United States, Arab countries, but also other states and peoples around the world. Serbia has to improve its image even more. Serbia does not have to prove its independence and sovereignty to anyone, but it seems to me that Serbia deserves an even better place so that the citizens of Serbia can be even more proud of their country. (Vučić, 2017)

The reason for Ana Brnabić being such an important figure in Serbia's international reputation was elaborated by Vučić a year earlier in the parliament, when he selected her as a minister for state administration and local self-government, saying that she is a member of the gay population:

> Ana Brnabić does not hide it and proudly talks about it....She was so sweet and kind, she told me: "President, I hope you don't mind, I am certain that this will be a topic for them..." And I replied: "No, I don't mind at all. All that is of interest to me, Ana, is your results, and I know how hard-working and dedicated you are." I am very happy for the opportunity to work with Ana and I don't care, it's her right. (Vučić, 2016)

Two days later presenting the cabinet to the members of parliament, Vučić repeated the same claim, adding, in response to criticism from the right-wing parties:

> But that does not mean...let me say it to those who claim that we have already legalized homosexual marriages, who I guess do so to scare the people and gain additional votes. We neither have done it, nor is there any plan or an idea to do so. (Vučić, 2016)

This claim immediately suggested that her appointment was meant to be purely symbolic in terms of substantive gender equality within society. Indeed, as a prime minister, Brnabić has been very reluctant to engage with issues related to gender equality. She claimed that she was not a spokesperson for the LGBT community and has rejected the characterization of herself as a gay minister. She also denied experiencing discrimination in Serbia, refuting claims that Serbia was a homophobic country (Surk, 2017). Nevertheless, same-sex civil unions remain illegal in Serbia, same-sex couples are prohibited from adopting children, and no legislation exists to address the position of intersex persons. Consequently, while Ana Brnabić can make official visits to the EU with her same-sex partner, in Serbia she has no legal connections with either her partner or their child.

There is broad evidence that her appointment was merely "for show," while her effective role was to obey the president. In the above-cited claim, the president portrayed her as "sweet and kind," attributes traditionally associated with femininity and perceived vulnerability, while positioning himself as a paternal figure offering protection and guidance. When he announced her selection for the position of prime minister, he argued that although officially she would serve as prime minister, her role would be to focus on economic issues, digitalization, and the IT sector, while a male leader of another political party—who is more experienced in politics—would essentially cover the political issues (Vučić, 2017). This initial framing set the tone for their future relationship dynamics. It quickly became apparent that Brnabić had limited agency in her role as prime minister. As Aničić argues, she was "relegated to a position of a silent presence" (Aničić, 2018, p. 261). Despite the Serbian Constitution stipulating the prime minister to be the most powerful position in the state, with the president's role primarily ceremonial, Brnabić kept referring to Vučić as her "boss" and merely executing his directives (Zaharijević & Antonijević, 2024, p. 96). By assuming this submissive role, Brnabić inadvertently reinforced and perpetuated the patriarchy instead of challenging it.

A similar pattern was evident when the gender parity government was formed in 2020. Announcing the formation of the new government, president Vučić justified it through the need to improve the country's image, thereby positioning himself as an authoritarian leader, who is above the government:

> Another idea, my wish: I asked the candidate for the Prime Minister if it would be possible that 50 or close to 50 percent of the Government members are women. I think that this would be revolutionary for Serbia, that in doing so we would present our country in the best possible way and show, not in words but in deeds, how gender equality works, and show that women are equally capable and even more capable of performing the highest state functions, and I believe that the head of the cabinet will have understanding for this political request. (Vučić, 2020)

In her inaugural speech in the parliament three weeks later, Ana Brnabić mostly spoke about the economy. Prime ministers in Serbia use their inaugural address to set their vision of the country in the coming period and present the government's main goals and tasks. Gender equality was mentioned in just two sentences at the end of her long speech when she invited other organizations and institutions to follow the government's example of gender parity.

A tentative explanation of why Serbia cared about its international legitimacy in these specific moments was the heightened international attention regarding increased media control and limited electoral freedoms in Serbia. The main gender equality reforms coincided with moments in which Serbia was under a negative

spotlight. For example, the first large-scale anti-regime protests in Serbia started in 2016 after an illegal demolition of houses in a Belgrade neighbourhood that had stood in the way of the government-led Belgrade Waterfront project. The common features of these protests were demands for accountability and media and electoral freedoms, as well as concerns for democratic backsliding in Serbia. It was during this period that international attention towards Serbia's undemocratic practices began to intensify. Concerns regarding democratic backsliding, erosion of press freedom, electoral integrity issues, and other challenges to democratic principles garnered increased attention from international organizations, human rights groups, and foreign governments (OSCE, 2017). Enjoying a reputation as Europe's favourite stabilocrat, Vučić had to manage his international image and distract the West from bad news about the country.

Similarly, the decision of opposition parties to boycott the 2020 general elections due to irregularities and unfair electoral rules prompted additional reforms. Knowing that the boycott could turn negative attention on the regime, it could reasonably be expected that the ruling party introduced the following measures to counteract any potential harm to its democratic reputation: the electoral threshold was lowered from 5% to 3% to incentivize more parties to participate in the elections and affirmative action measures for national minorities and women were strengthened. Despite the general recommendation against amending electoral laws in an election year (Venice Commission, 2002), these measures were enacted in the parliament just one month prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections. After the elections, the ruling majority was composed of 243 out of 250 MPs in total, leaving the parliamentary opposition with a mere 7 MPs, 6 of whom were national minority representatives.

Since the political participation of women is one of the indicators of political pluralism, one could expect that one aim of introducing more women (and national minorities) to the government was to counter the lack of party pluralism. These amendments included raising the gender quota from 30% to 40%, which was presented to the audience as a breakthrough in the protection of gender equality, even though the percentage of women in the parliament at that moment was 37.2%. However, these changes only resulted in a modest 2.56% increase in the parliamentary presence of women during the 2020–2022 period. Following the 2022 elections, the percentage of women declined to 35.2%. The changes to gender quotas were accompanied by a carefully orchestrated performance: the legislation was proposed by a prominent female opposition MP, ostensibly to foster an image of cooperation, democratic decision-making processes, and equal treatment of opposition parties. This performance was aimed at annulling criticism alleging that the parliamentary majority stifled debate and silenced opposition voices. Intriguingly, the same MP later joined the regime post-elections as the minister for human and minority rights and social dialogue.

All of these examples provide evidence that autocratic genderwashing is at least partially an explanation for gender equality reforms in Serbia. Media reports suggest that these moves indeed had an immediate positive effect on Serbia's image internationally: Brnabić's appointment received widespread acclaim, creating an impression of progress on gender equality in a country where nearly half the population considers homosexuality to be an illness (CESID, 2021). While she was not previously active as a feminist or advocate for pro-LGBTQ rights, her identity itself served well to send the intended message. For instance, the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade congratulated her appointment with the message: "Serbia now looks like progressive Scandinavian countries" (Ilić, 2021). International media such as *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* wrote about Serbia's historic step (Erickson, 2017; MacDowall, 2017). They later also wrote about the gender parity government at length, praising Serbia for gender equality. International

commentators promptly suggested that Serbia's "women's government" propelled the country "to the brink of the global top 10 for gender equality" (Savic, 2020).

Gender equality rankings also note these improvements (see Figure 3). Serbia's ranking surged from 54th position in 2014 to 19th in the world on the Global Gender Gap Index, primarily as a result of the improvements in the domain of political power and political participation. Its rise began in 2017 after Ana Brnabić was appointed as prime minister, although it dropped again to 38th position in 2023 (The World Economic Forum, 2012–2023).

In 2016, Serbia was the first non-EU country to produce a Gender Equality Index, which was first launched by the European Institute for Gender Equality to monitor progress in terms of gender equality across the EU. Serbia's ranking over the years has demonstrated continuous progress in improving gender equality, particularly in the domain of decision-making. In 2021, Serbia stood in 23rd place among the EU member states, the UK, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia (Babović & Petrović, 2021). While Serbia's position in general has seemed to improve, all of these indices suggest that the improvement is mostly visible in the domain of power, while gender equality in the domains of health or economy still rates low.

Democracy rankings such as Freedom House also include gender equality among their indicators. Similarly to gender equality rankings, they also recognize Serbia's progress in political representation but point to the challenges women face in the job market and widespread domestic violence (Freedom House, 2024). All these reports claim that despite new legislation adopted in 2016 aimed at preventing domestic violence, such violence remains a problem within society, and implementation of these laws needs to be improved. When referring to Ana Brnabić's appointment, the Freedom House report from 2018 argues (with the reports from 2019 to 2023 repeating the same):
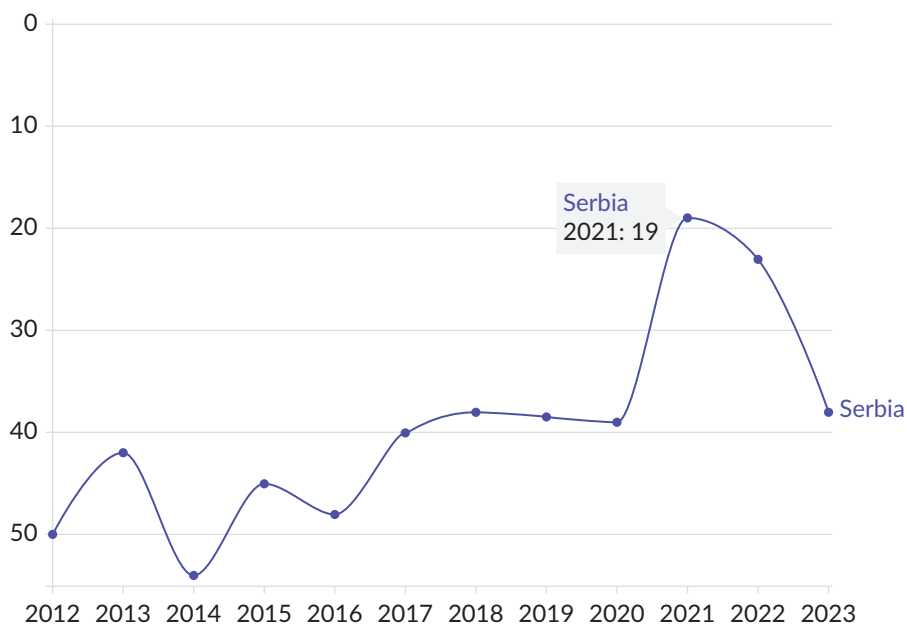

Figure 3. Serbia's ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index 2012–2023.

> Ana Brnabić became Serbia's first woman and first openly gay prime minister in June 2017, but critics argued that her appointment was a superficial bid to please the EU rather than a genuine sign of greater engagement on issues of importance to women or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. (Freedom House, 2024)

Similarly, the EU acknowledges the steps forward but points to slow implementation, lack of official sex-disaggregated data and statistics in several domains, and a delay in adopting action plans (e.g., related to the prevention of gender-based violence), which prevents implementation of the previously adopted laws and strategies (European Commission, 2023). Pointing to the delay in implementation and widespread gender-based inequalities within Serbian society, these reports support a genderwashing conclusion. In addition to the lack of substantive effects across society, international reports suggest that the adopted reforms also do not produce the expected effects at an international level. Even when international reputation explains gender equality reforms, these intentions are not necessarily effective, particularly in the long run.

6. Domestic Audiences: Gender Equality Reforms Serving Conservative Ends

The previous section has shown that international image management is a convincing explanation for gender equality reforms in Serbia. However, the findings point to additional complexity: While international audiences are important, the political elites also address domestic audiences. Initially formed through a split from the radical right-wing SRS, the SNS sought to distance itself from its extremist roots and cultivate an image of a pro-European and modern party to garner support internationally. Since its formation, the party has had to play different roles in front of the international community and its electorate to keep the support of both audiences. Over time, as it solidified its grip on power and monopolized control over public institutions and the media, the party turned to gender equality policies as a means to mask Serbia's increasingly autocratic tendencies from the international community. Internally, however, the SNS aims not only to maintain its position as the ruling party but also to become the sole political force with widespread voter backing. This necessitates adapting its messaging to cater to diverse constituencies, leading to the simultaneous promotion of controversial discourses.

Gender equality reforms were meant to signal to the progressive and liberal parts of society that the SNS has broken with its radical past and has the capacity and intention to represent voters across the ideological spectrum. Justifications of the proposals aimed at preventing gender-based violence suggest that the regime was—in the first phase (2012–2016) at least—partially interested in gender equality not only because of its international but also domestic reputation. Parliamentary debates point to two main explanations when justifying the 2013 and 2016 reforms related to gender-based violence. First, government representatives argued that "violence against women and domestic violence is a serious social problem that the Republic of Serbia also faces" (Jovan Krkobabić, deputy prime minister and minister of labour, employment, and social policy, parliamentary transcript, 17 October 2013) and consequently that there is an urgent need that Serbia addresses this issue (Nela Kuburović, minister of justice, parliamentary transcript, 15 November 2016). The second explanation offered in both cases was that the reforms were required as part of EU integration and the harmonization of its legislation with the legal acquis of the EU.

However, to appeal to as broad a constituency as possible while maintaining its dominant position in a country where the majority of voters are conservative, the ruling political party has consistently juggled between a more pro-European and liberal stance on women's rights and anti-gender discourses. While acknowledging the importance of women's presence in public spaces and gender-related legislation in principle, the Serbian regime has adeptly redirected these reforms to advance conservative objectives. This balancing is visible both in the way that gender equality reforms are adopted and in the parliamentary speeches of SNS MPs. Since 2016, SNS has been the party that predominantly spoke about women, creating an impression that they had monopolized the gender equality theme. However, when SNS MPs speak about women, they mostly speak about pregnant women and mothers, positioning themselves as guardians of natality, traditional values, and patriarchy. Women's rights are portrayed as a priority primarily due to concerns over negative demographic trends. The emphasis is not on supporting women as individuals or achieving gender equality, but rather on viewing women solely as birth-givers:

> Children have a special position in Serbia, in our society, and it should be so, and we are always ready to give up everything, precisely for the sake of our children and descendants. That is why we need to invest much more in the birth rates and the support of the first child....We need to talk about it, we need to put pressure on it, and I think that precisely, if our male colleagues do not think about it much, we, women in politics, must be louder and ask for more money for support and birth giving....We want women to be modern, to get involved in politics, to be educated, to work, to be in their careers, to be as dedicated as possible, but we need support, we need kindergartens, we need schools, we need help at home if you want us to cover all that is required of us, to give our maximum as citizens of this society. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 21 November 2019)

> We are fighting for gender equality, equality between men and women, and in that fight, we should remember that we must not lose the most beautiful qualities that adorn a woman, which is to be and remain the gentler sex, and also for men to be and remain gentlemen. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 13 December 2016)

Since 2016, SNS MPs have delivered the highest number of speeches mentioning women compared to other political parties. However, in the 2016–2020 assembly, one-third of their speeches referred to women primarily in the context of praising the ruling majority (the president in particular), highlighting the government's achievements, and criticizing the opposition. Therefore, while MPs do address women, they do not necessarily advocate for their rights or seek to improve their societal status. Rather, these speeches aim to enhance the image and influence of the ruling political party. Moreover, claims about women are often utilized to discredit political opponents:

> I cannot help but notice that every time a law enters parliamentary procedure, the opposition displays enormous hatred towards the Government of the Republic of Serbia and towards Aleksandar Vučić, who are doing nothing but fighting through these laws and showing enormous efforts to improve lives of Serbian citizens. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić absolutely cares about women who are unemployed and who are the least employable, namely women who are between 40 and 50 years old and who lost their jobs precisely because of the policies of those experts across the room. That hurts them the most, and that is the reason why they are tireless in fabrications and lies. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 25 October 2018)

> We help women, empower them and implement measures, we introduce programs related to a better social economic status of women. What they [the opposition] do, they insult them and call them derogatory names, they even physically hurt or disparage them. (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 6 March 2019)

These claims suggest that the regime instrumentalizes the gender equality theme for diverse purposes. While international reputation is a significant part of its agenda, it is reasonable to assume that it also—at least in the first years of its rule—wanted to address the progressive segments of society. In the second phase after 2016, the regime exploited the theme in the parliament mostly to delegitimize the opposition and secure a predominant position. The second phase is also characterised by the rise of anti-gender discourses, which have been promoted simultaneously with the promotion of gender equality.

At the same time as the gender parity government was being formed, Serbia made a step in an illiberal direction. It founded the Ministry of Family Care and Demography, appointing a politician known for his misogynistic and homophobic remarks to lead it (Ćeriman & Vučković Juroš, 2023, p. 7). Yet, the ministry made no significant actions and the minister rarely made public appearances. They have rather been supporting civil society discussions on demographic challenges and slowly shifting the public attention to these issues without alarming international observers. Vučić's regular participation in the Budapest Demographic Summit, alongside other leaders from Central and Eastern Europe known for their conservative views, as well as church leaders and experts, further underscores the illiberal agenda. The summit actively promotes traditional family values as a solution to demographic challenges.

Another example involves the emergence of anti-gender mobilizations, which started in 2017 in response to an education package aimed at preventing sexual violence in kindergartens and schools. This package, designed to guide teachers on addressing issues such as body image, sexuality, consent, and gender-based violence, was developed by a prominent NGO in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Policy and the parliament (Ćeriman & Vučković Juroš, 2023; Zaharijević & Antonijević, 2024). However, public backlash fuelled by right-wing political parties and groups brought the package down within two weeks.

The media played a significant role in perpetuating a narrative about the supposed sexualization of children, aligning itself with typical anti-gender discourse suggesting that traditional family values were under threat and that homosexuality was being promoted. The minister of education joined this narrative, condemning the package despite its prior governmental approval. He argued that certain aspects of the package were "against our tradition and culture," implying that the EU had demanded sexual education (Popadić, 2017).

The strengthening of authoritarianism and right-wing populism within the SNS can also be read in the debate on the Draft Law on Gender Equality. Initially, it was anticipated that this law would be passed alongside the Law on Same-Sex Partnership, as both jointly entered the parliamentary procedure. Yet, the president immediately said that he would not confirm the law, citing its alleged unconstitutionality due to the constitutional definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006). Although the draft law, proposed by Brnabić's government, aimed to legalize same-sex unions and did not mention marriage, the government quickly withdrew the proposal from the parliament.

On the other hand, the Law on Gender Equality was adopted after a heated discussion between dissatisfied anti-gender—primarily male—voices within the SNS and the minister for human and minority rights and

social dialogue. There was an intriguing performance at play here: Both laws were proposed by the minister who was, prior to her sudden appointment to the government, a prominent opposition MP. After being a vocal democrat and a feminist for more than 20 years, she was not perceived by the public as a representative of the SNS. In that sense, while the regime stood behind the bill, the domestic audience did not necessarily have that perception. Vučić's clear stance against same-sex partnerships and vocal anti-gender discourse in the parliament strongly shaped public perceptions about the laws. The Law on Gender Equality was adopted but its main intended consequence was ticking the EU boxes and turning attention away from Serbia's autocratization practices.

There were very few voices within the SNS who wholeheartedly supported the law, even though the bill was proposed by the party and adopted by its MPs. The main concern centred around the notion of gender, which, according to the ruling party MPs, distorts the "natural" roles and relationships between men and women. Interestingly, during these discussions, women MPs remained noticeably quiet. Their silence sharply contrasted with their outspokenness when instrumentalizing women's rights to praise Vučić and criticize the opposition:

> What are we going to do with people who suddenly wish to feel like the underrepresented sex and say: "It does not matter; I feel a bit like a woman"? Are we going to quickly open gender reassignment surgery somewhere? We have all witnessed that some individuals here changed nations, some changed their place of residence to become councillors, some changed their name; it is to be expected that people will want, for the sake of their position, to quickly change their sex. Who will determine in that situation whether someone has changed their sex? (SNS MP, parliamentary transcript, 18 May 2021)

In the scarce parliamentary discussions on the law, the concept of "gender" was completely separated from the fight for equality and linked to "gender ideology," "LGBT ideology," and "Western innovations." This suggests that Serbia is joining a wave of right-wing populism and anti-gender mobilizations, which are becoming increasingly resonant across Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The process of passing this law is a good example of the instrumentalization of gender equality. Both the president and the government supported the law because of international pressure. Surprisingly the whole process was very inclusive and many civil society recommendations were adopted. However, the public in Serbia had a different perspective: there were no feminist voices within the parliament who publicly defended the law beyond the sole feminist minister, who had spent her whole political career genuinely advocating for gender equality. Due to the electoral boycott, democratic opposition was not present in the parliament, which additionally explains the silence. The ruling coalition MPs were either quiet during the parliamentary debates or spoke against the law. This speaks to the dominant conservative party membership within the SNS, but also a strong party discipline as they in the end had to vote for the proposal and pass the law.

The shift from a more progressive orientation when the SNS came to power to the rise of anti-gender discourses within the party since 2017 suggests that the regime may well shift further toward right-wing populism and anti-feminism in the coming period. If so, Serbia would follow the path of Hungary and Turkey, in which the approach to gender equality has changed depending on the regime's goals across different political stages. This suggests that the timing and regime changes, in addition to the genderwashing perspective, could have a significant effect on gender equality reforms.

7. Conclusion

This article adds to the emerging literature on gender equality reforms in autocratic regimes. It contributes particularly to our understanding of gender equality in Central and Eastern Europe, a region relatively underexplored in gender scholarship (Bogetić, 2022). Focusing on the case of Serbia, this study illustrates how electoral autocracies may weaponize gender equality reforms to maintain their international legitimacy, although the intended effects of such strategies are not guaranteed. Since ruling parties in such regimes aim not only to be in power but to be the only relevant actor upon the domestic political scene, they also need support from more progressive parts of society. Unlike democratic reforms in the areas of rule of law, political pluralism or media freedom, which could destabilize and threaten the regime's survival, gender equality reforms are perceived as less risky and yet still deeply intertwined with democracy. Consequently, they serve as a convenient option for autocratic leaders seeking to demonstrate compliance with international democratic norms. However, since its survival depends on broader audiences such as conservative voters, the regime needs to balance these democratic reforms with a more conservative agenda. Consequently, these reforms can only partially translate into substantial advancements in gender equality within these countries. Implementation gaps persist and the governments frequently manipulate the narrative surrounding these reforms to align with conservative agendas internally.

The case of Serbia underscores how governments can shape the perception of their decisions to suit different audiences, often leading to contradictory outcomes. Regimes can simultaneously make contradictory moves such as promoting gender equality while simultaneously suppressing it. For instance, while the appointment of a gay woman as the prime minister was lauded internationally as a symbol of tolerance and gender equality, her positioning in Serbia reinforced existing patriarchal structures. Similarly, the Law on Gender Equality was an important milestone in Serbia's progress towards EU integration, but domestically the regime managed to exclusively portray its disagreements with the law, framing it as an attack upon the Serbian traditional family and national survival. These findings highlight the potential for gender equality reforms to inadvertently empower regimes to further entrench autocratic practices, ultimately undermining the very principles they purport to advance. Finally, the article points to the need for additional research on the connections between gender equality reforms and different political stages of hybrid regimes, those in between liberal democracies and closed autocracies.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Transcripts of all plenary sessions of the National Assembly of Serbia are available here: https://otvoreniparlament.rs/transkript

Recordings of the parliamentary sessions, committee meetings, and media conferences are available at the website of the Serbian parliament: http://www.parlament.gov.rs/prenosi.2092.html

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Open Access Journal

The Power of Norms: Gender Equality Reforms in the Parliaments of Fiji and Samoa

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Abstract

Parliaments are increasingly defined as "gendered institutions," with rules, norms, and practices that are often stubbornly resistant to gender equality initiatives. The gender sensitive parliaments' global agenda has made substantial progress in both drawing attention to the gendered nature of parliaments and in spearheading gender equality reform. While a positive trend, there remains a significant disconnect between the (global) normative framework that sets out this agenda and the realization of gender equality in national (local) parliaments. In this article, we build on previous work that begins to unpack and test the process of global norm localization through "contextualization" and "contestation." We select new sites to test these processes—Fiji and Samoa—where specific gender equality reforms have been implemented in the past 10 years, one a gender mainstreaming mandate for parliamentary committees and the other a parliamentary gender quota. The Pacific Islands region presents an important cultural context worthy of exploration: Parliaments are not only overwhelmingly male-dominated, but many are also derivative of hegemonic masculinist cultures evident in the Westminster tradition, albeit hybridized with local political traditions. We compare and contrast the process by which these reforms were developed and implemented in each country and examine the extent to which they can be considered effective mechanisms for addressing gender inequalities. We find that the extent to which these reforms are sustainable and transformative depends on local contexts, local actors, and locally derived solutions. Specifically, the culturally relevant process of contesting the gender quota in Samoa constitutionally, electorally, and through the courts has localised and thereby legitimised this globally endorsed reform. By contrast, gender mainstreaming in Fiji's parliamentary committees has been little more than a "tick-a-box" exercise, having had limited engagement from the political elite under a relatively autocratic regime.

Keywords

Fiji; gender equality reform; gender-sensitive parliaments; localisation; Samoa

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1. Introduction

As researchers and practitioners in support of gender sensitive parliaments (GSPs), we have been interested in the relationship between international norms and the process by which these norms are localised within, and, thereby, transform individual parliaments. In a previous work (Palmieri & Baker, 2022), we argued that a range of international resolutions, research reports, and plans of action developed over successive decades related to GSPs now constitute a robust normative framework. This global framework sets out key principles by which parliaments can become model institutions for the advancement of gender equality. They can: institute gender balance across membership and leadership positions, mainstream gender across all outputs and processes, commit to institutional responsibility for gender equality advocacy, and ensure the workplace is underpinned by a zero tolerance of sexism, harassment, and violence against women and other marginalised groups. A second, but no less critical, element to our argument was that these global norms need to be "localised" if parliaments are to systematically address gender equality. Just as GSPs are defined by their active reorientation of processes and outputs to achieve gender equality (Childs & Palmieri, 2023, p. 177), localisation requires active construction "through discourse, framing, grafting and cultural selection of foreign ideas by local actors" (Acharya, 2004, p. 245). Our previous work highlighted two specific processes by which localisation (or the active construction of a global norm within local institutions) occurs: norm contextualisation—that is, embedding the norm within the cultures and practices of the local institution—and norm contestation—which may take the form of outright objection to, or critical engagement with, the global norm, or something in between (Wiener, 2018, p. 22). In the absence of norm localisation, such reforms can instead be perceived as a form of "genderwashing," or a move simply designed to enhance a regime's democratic credentials and perceptions of democratic legitimacy (see Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022).

In this article, we examine the extent to which gender equality reforms recognised as international good practice and implemented in the parliaments of Fiji and Samoa can be considered effective mechanisms to address local gender inequalities. Among the suite of measures that can be taken to gender sensitise a parliament, GSP advocates have argued that the parliament as a whole should: (a) take responsibility for the pursuit of gender equality by ensuring there is gender diversity across all of its bodies and leadership positions, and (b) implement a gender mainstreaming approach that normalises the use of gender analysis frameworks and expertise (Palmieri, 2018). Both gender balance and gender mainstreaming are well-established, commonly articulated normative ideals in the international community. The term "gender balance" was first enshrined in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 which urged governments to take measures "to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and at the same levels as men" (United Nations Specialised Conferences, 1995, p. 95). While gender mainstreaming was also first established in the Platform for Action, the United Nations Economic and Social Council agreed conclusions provided further definition as a "process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels" (UN Economic and Social Council, 1997, p. 1). Since the mid-1990s, these concepts have guided policymaking and development programs, not to mention a plethora of toolkits and resources, focused on achieving gender equality (Acosta et al., 2019). As we show below, Pacific states have been a part of international debates on gender-balanced parliamentary reform and parliamentary gender mainstreaming, even if these ideas have not as yet been widely adopted in the region.

2. Gender Sensitive Parliamentary Reform in the Pacific Context

Little of the global research on GSPs has critically considered the gender sensitivity of Pacific parliaments or the processes involved in contextualising GSP norms and practices within Pacific democratic cultures. This is despite the mobilisation of feminist civil society organisations in each country to push for such reforms and the investment of resources from international development agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) towards gender sensitive parliamentary strengthening in this region. And yet, in 2013, the Samoan constitution was amended to include a parliamentary gender quota and in 2014 the Fiji parliament's standing orders were amended to include a gender mainstreaming provision. These represent significant GSP achievements in a region well known to be resistant to gender equality in politics (see Baker, 2018, 2019).

The parliaments of Samoa and Fiji, however, can be seen to be at the forefront of gender equality innovation. They were among the first Pacific Islands countries to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in September 1992 and August 1995 respectively. Samoa ratified the Convention without reservations, while the two reservations initially made by Fiji (to articles 5(a) relating to the elimination of prejudices, customary and all other practices, and article 9 on nationality) were withdrawn five years later in 2000. While Papua New Guinea ratified CEDAW earlier than Fiji in January 1995, and Vanuatu followed shortly after Fiji in September 1995, it would take another 10 years for most of the other countries in the region to ratify the convention, and there still remain three notable non-ratifiers: Tonga, Niue, and Palau. Moreover, of the independent states in the region, Fiji and Samoa have also historically had a higher proportion of women elected to parliament than the regional average (8.8%, as of late 2023). Fiji hit a high of 19% women before the 2022 election while Samoa reached its highest proportion following its 2021 election, at 11.3%. These two countries remain the only ones in the region to institute, respectively, a gender mainstreaming mandate in parliament and a parliamentary gender quota.

Importantly, these reforms have been implemented in parliaments underpinned by an inherent tension—between Western and local understandings of democracy and governance. While this tension is perhaps characteristic of many post-colonial parliaments, there are also unique Pacific elements at play, well-illustrated in the story behind the buildings that have housed these parliaments. In March 2012, Samoa's government announced that the country's original parliament house, the Fale Fono, would be demolished. Built-in 1916, the Fale Fono had hosted sittings of the Legislative Assembly before and after independence in 1962, but was replaced by a new building, the Maota Fono, in the early 1970s (which was subsequently replaced by a new, more climate-resilient parliament building in 2019). In ordering the demolition, Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi suggested the building was a hazard and an eyesore, and the space could be better used for outdoor events on parliament's grounds ("Samoa's old Parliament," 2012). Yet others, including members of the opposition, mourned the loss of the Fale Fono as an important historical site: "This building signified the struggle we went through as a nation, it is the foundation of our independence, we shed blood and tears in this building to get where we are today" ("Samoan government demolishes," 2012).

Fiji's seat of parliament was first built in 1937 under the British colonial administration. Unlike Samoa's Fale Fono, which was built in the style of a traditional meeting house, Fiji's first parliament was designed in a typical art deco style by the chief colonial architect and did not incorporate any specifically Fijian design elements (Halter et al., 2018). Upon its opening in May 1939, it was used as the Legislative Council of Fiji, eventually becoming the Parliament of Fiji at independence in 1970. In 1987, the first of four coup d'états resulted in

the building being disused for extended periods. A new parliamentary complex was opened in Veiuto in 1992, this time built in a traditional Fijian house design that included masi cloths, wooden furnishings, and open-air corridors (Halter et al., 2018). This building became the scene of another coup in 2000, during which the prime minister and other parliamentarians were held hostage for 56 days. Eventually, another coup in 2006 would result in the suspension of parliament for eight years. The introduction of a new constitution in 2013 shepherded the election of a government under Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama that returned parliament to the art deco "government buildings."

The demolition of Samoa's Fale Fono, while controversial, is a reminder that the Legislative Assembly—currently comprised of 53 members—is above all a young parliament; less tethered to historical precedent than other parliaments in the Westminster tradition. Instead, it is relatively dynamic and able to innovate. In its first 50 years, the legislative assembly consistently tinkered with key tenets of its democratic system, including suffrage and term length. Initially, voting rights were restricted to *matai* title holders only. In 1990, following a referendum, suffrage was expanded to all adults over the age of 21. In 1991, the government extended the parliamentary term from three to five years, with immediate effect. These changes were enabled by the remarkable political stability engineered by the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP). From the 1980s to 2021, the HRPP had a near-monopoly on Samoan politics, consistently re-elected with two-thirds majorities or higher, which enabled the party to change the constitution essentially at will (Iati, 2013). In the far less stable but still patriarchal parliamentary context of Fiji, the reversion to a Westminster-inspired building perhaps signals a perception among some political elders of the relative safety in foreign parliamentary traditions, particularly insofar as they were seen to minimise the challenge of divisive internal ethnic politics (see Herr, 2015). Fiji's tumultuous post-independence political history has seen four coups, four constitutions, and very few peaceful transfers of power. Under the current electoral regime based on the 2013 constitution, the parliament, composed of 51 members, is elected by a single-electorate open-list proportional representation system.

3. Research Design and Methods

The balancing act between local and Western democratic norms described in the previous section is not just a backdrop to our research problem—it is foundational. Gender sensitive norms, when institutionalized legitimately, have the power to bring long-lasting change for gender equality, but we suggest that the process of legitimizing those norms depends entirely on the amenability of local institutional cultures. Our question then is how are international norms localised in male-dominated parliaments and where there is an ongoing struggle between Western interpretations of democracy and local norms of traditional governance, including on the appropriate role of women in politics? This research differs from our previous work (see Palmieri & Baker, 2022) on two specific counts: (a) we take a comparative perspective rather than a single case study; and (b) we consider two different gender sensitive reforms rather than one (previously, family-friendly reforms in the Parliament of New Zealand). There is of course a significant limitation to our current approach—we are clearly not comparing like for like, nor are we able to dedicate the same level of in-depth analysis to each case. We consider, however, that there is still merit in our comparative approach given our primary concern in the role of context on the acceptance (or not) of a norm rather than the reforms themselves.

We reapply our methodology of practice tracing derived from the work of Pouliot (2015), using publicly available sources, including news articles and blogs, transcripts of speeches, and scholarly commentary to

describe retrospectively the practices involved in implementing and sustaining the reforms. Some of the research presented in this article also draws on interviews undertaken as part of a larger project (see Palmieri & Nailumu, in press). In Pouliot's (2015, p. 258) words, practices "are both particular (as contextually embedded) and general (as patterns of actions)." As such, we can use practice tracing to generate both specific and wider insights from in-depth case study research.

While we have both played practitioner roles in the gender sensitive parliamentary arena (both as parliamentary staffers and as consultants), this research has predominantly been undertaken from the position of academics. Mindful of this positionality, we begin our analysis by considering the rule changes implemented from both their international normative perspective and their cultural and institutional contexts. While we took an open approach to operationalizing the concept of contextualization, we were broadly interested in three factors: (a) the language used to establish the reform; (b) the local appetite for international gender sensitive norms; and (c) the male leaders' involvement in the establishment of the reforms. We then describe processes we consider to be norm contestation. We looked for evidence of critical engagement with, or even objection to, the reform in each country. We find that in Samoa, the gender quota has emerged as a stronger, although still disputed, element of the country's parliamentary process as a consequence of significant local contestation. In Fiji's more authoritarian parliamentary environment, where contestation was effectively outlawed for over a decade, gender mainstreaming remains part of the standing orders but is implemented with limited motivation and effectiveness.

4. Towards Norm Localisation: Understanding Reforms in Context

We now describe how gender balance and gender mainstreaming reforms were implemented in Samoa and Fiji respectively to understand the relevant institutional and cultural contexts.

4.1. Reforms to Achieve Gender Balanced Parliamentary Representation in Samoa

Women have historically been under-represented in Samoan politics. The first woman parliamentarian, Leaupepe Taulapapa Faimaala Phillips, was elected in 1970. As of January 2024, 19 women have been elected or appointed to the Samoan parliament, excluding those who were unseated in post-election court challenges. Yet within the Pacific Islands region, with its generally low levels of women's political representation, Samoa is something of an outlier. The longest-serving woman MP in the region, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, is Samoan; since 2016, she has also served as Samoa's first woman deputy prime minister and, since 2021, its first woman prime minister.

Samoan society is based around the system of *fa'amatai*. Under this system, each extended family is led by a *matai*, who is chosen by consensus. The *matai* have leadership responsibilities within their family, village, and wider community. Only *matai* are eligible to sit on the village council (*fono*). At the national level, parliamentary candidates are required to have a *matai* title from the constituency they wish to represent.

While in theory women and men have mostly equal rights to *matai* titles, in practice titles are most often bestowed upon men. One noted trend is that of eligible women ceding potential titles to male relatives, a process that is often engaged willingly but does reflect norms of leadership in Samoan communities (Meleisea et al., 2015; Motusaga, 2021). As per the 2021 census, just 8.9% of Samoan residents with *matai* titles were

women (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2022). When women do hold *matai* titles, they are less likely than their male counterparts to participate in village government, either because of formal bans or informal barriers (Meleisea et al., 2015).

In 2013, Samoa became the first country in the Pacific Islands region to introduce a parliamentary gender quota. The implementation of this quota was very much driven from within the cabinet: long-serving HRPP Prime Minister Tuilaepa was a key proponent, and the quota legislation was swiftly passed despite some concerns raised by the opposition and backbench government politicians (Baker, 2019). On its face, Samoa's gender quota reform is evidence of innovation, this time towards the goal of creating a more gender-equal institution, in a young parliament.

In September 2011, Tuilaepa announced his intention to implement a parliamentary gender quota. This came as a surprise to many, given his previous public statements opposing such a move. In January 2012, a constitutional amendment was introduced for debate in parliament. This proposed amendment set a minimum level of women's representation at "10%...which for the avoidance of doubt is presently five" (Government of Samoa, 2013). Should fewer women be elected in any general election, the amendment mandated the creation of additional seats for women to meet this threshold. These seats would be occupied by the highest-polling (percentage-wise) unsuccessful women candidates in that election (Baker, 2019). While a UN technical advisor was sent to Samoa to assist with the development of the quota, the relatively unusual design of the quota suggests a local design. This is emphasised by the target of 10% representation—significantly below the 30% target set by the Millennium Development Goals, but a more realistic and acceptable figure in a context defined by consistently low levels of women's representation.

Opposition MPs, and even some members of the HRPP, initially expressed their opposition to the idea. Arguments against the quota were generally based on ideas of fairness and merit. Other criticism of the quota proposal centred around the perception that it was a foreign-led agenda. This idea was exemplified by a common rumour circulating at the time, that then-United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon had personally persuaded Tuilaepa to adopt a gender quota. While this was never confirmed, Tuilaepa's public statements did suggest international norms had some influence, with repeated references to UN human rights mandates and to the "embarrassment" of persistently low levels of women's political representation (see Baker, 2019).

Despite the controversy, in June 2013, the parliament overwhelmingly voted in favour of the amendment at its third reading, and it was passed into law. The government's ability to push through the gender quota law was due to its two-thirds majority in parliament and the significant political capital of Tuilaepa who had been prime minister since 1998. This political dominance was maintained through policies designed to weaken opposition movements and limit media freedom (see Iati, 2013). In this context, and given the comments above, the quota reform process could arguably be considered a move designed to improve Samoa's international reputation for democracy rather than substantively increase women's access to decision-making. Nevertheless, the move to establish a minimum level of women's representation in parliament—at a relatively low 10%, but still higher than any previous Samoan parliament—was significant.

During the period in which the gender quota legislation was debated in parliament, there were two women MPs, both HRPP members: Fiame (who was also a cabinet minister) and Gatoloaifaana Amataga

Alesana-Gidlow. Neither played an active role in drafting or defending the legislation (Baker, 2019). This could be seen as an example of the practice of "implicit feminism" in allowing men to take the lead in advocating gender equality initiatives (see Spark et al., 2021). Indeed, the prime minister was overwhelmingly viewed as the key proponent of the quota and it was his support for the proposal that was seen as the key factor guaranteeing its success (Baker, 2019). Outside the country, Fiame was called on to promote the Samoan quota, and her comments point to an implicit feminism strategy. At a regional conference on temporary special measures (TSMs) organized by the UNDP in 2015, she explained: "we decided that we needed to provide a floor, not a ceiling," and further advised her regional peers that "you have to have a leadership that has the political will to [introduce a TSM]. We need to target the leadership—they need to say, 'this is the job and this is the action we need to take'" (UNDP, 2015, pp. 14–15).

4.2. The Fijian Parliamentary Mandate for Gender Mainstreaming

The Parliament of Fiji has had some of the Pacific region's highest representation of women and indeed, often appeared higher than Samoa in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's international rankings (see Figure 1). In 2018, the parliament reached its highest proportion of women at just under 20% without a gender quota in place. This milestone, however, was followed by a steep drop in the subsequent 2022 election when only six women candidates were successful, taking up 10.9% of parliamentary seats (Kant & Baker, 2023). Gender quotas have not been implemented in Fiji, although they had been promised by various political parties before the 2006 election (Nicholl, 2007, p. 161).

Instead, the gender equality reform established in Fiji, related to the operation of the parliament, was reinstated after eight years of suspension. In 2013, Fiji's fourth (and latest) constitution since independence

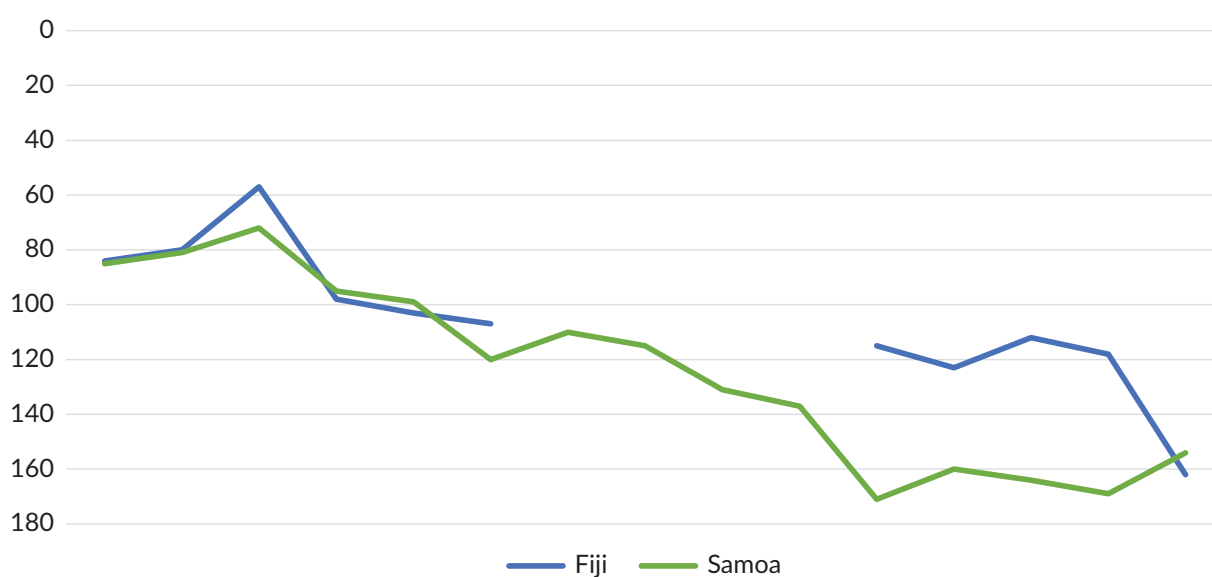**Figure 1.** Falling international rankings of women in national parliaments, 1996–2024. Notes: The higher the global ranking number (y axis), the lower the country is ranked over time (x axis); The Fiji Parliament was suspended from 2006 to 2014; Data reflects the international ranking at the beginning of the plotted year, except in 1996 where it reflects the ranking at end of that year. Source: IPU (2024).

introduced an open-list proportional representation system. The new electoral system, coupled with restrictions on citizens' rights to freedom of speech and opposition, resulted in the landslide election of Fiji First, the party of 2006 coup leader and former "interim prime minister" Bainimarama. The opposition—the Social Democratic Liberal Party and the National Federation Party—was described as "virtually smothered by Fiji First's parliamentary hegemony" (Ratuva & Lawson, 2016, p. 9).

It is in this context that new rules of procedure were prepared for the parliament. The UNDP Pacific Office based in the country's capital, Suva, was asked to provide technical assistance in the lead-up to the re-establishment of the parliament, including revisions of its standing orders. The UNDP contracted an international consultant (a male former member of a sub-national assembly in the Global North) with considerable experience in global parliamentary support to begin consultations on a new set of standing orders. In reviewing the rules, the consultant referred to good practice guides in gender mainstreaming prepared by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2011, 2012) and consulted with international gender and politics experts working for UN Women (Palmieri & Nailumu, in press).

This consultant was personally committed to the idea that gender mainstreaming should be the responsibility of all parliamentary committees—in line with the model established in the Parliament of Sweden—rather than requiring one body to do all the gender mainstreaming work (Palmieri & Nailumu, in press). This being the case, the consultant drafted the following order as part of his review of the rules:

> 110 (2) Where a committee conducts an activity listed in clause (1), the committee shall ensure that full consideration will be given to the principle of gender equality so as to ensure all matters are considered with regard to the impact and benefit on both men and women equally. (Parliament of Fiji, 1994, p. 39)

In practice, the new provision made it mandatory for Fiji's six standing committees to "balance the interests of men and women in the scrutiny of bills and reports" (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, 2017, p. 303). Committees tabling a report that considered a bill were required to include a paragraph on issues related to gender. Committees scrutinising annual reports were encouraged to request sex-disaggregated data from government ministries and consider the differential benefits of government programs for men and women.

Rewriting the standing orders for a parliament that has been suspended for eight years is of course a political process. It is important to note that not all the amendments proposed by the UNDP's consultant to the standing orders were endorsed by the political leadership in Fiji, specifically, by the then Prime Minister Bainimarama and Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. Not unexpectedly, some proposals were rejected; the government had previously rejected an entire draft of the constitution prepared by the Constitution Commission in 2012 (Citizens' Constitutional Forum, 2016, p. 10). The gender mainstreaming amendment, however, was approved, and to date has not been changed in any way. In this sense, the standing order 110(2) represents a rare parliamentary mandate—in the Global South, but also the Global North—to support gender mainstreaming in the work of committees.

It also represents a nod by Fijian political leaders to international normative frameworks of good democratic practice, and a desire to be seen as reaffirming those democratic values to the international community. The 2006 military coup had seen Fiji suspended from regional and international fora such as the Commonwealth, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Pacific Islands Forum, organisations known to

espouse values of democracy and human rights, including gender equality. Fiji's position—both in the region and internationally—was considered "strengthened by its return to democratic rule" (Stewart, 2016, p. 231). On his election, Bainimarama publicly claimed an interest in joining these communities:

> ....I will be travelling to New York in the coming days to attend the United Nations General Assembly. There, I will tell the world what we have just accomplished in Fiji....Because I promised the nation of Fiji and the international community that I would take Fiji to the first genuine democracy in our history and I have kept that promise. (Morris, 2014)

While not a drafter of the standing order, the newly appointed female Speaker Dr Jiko Luveni became one of its strongest advocates. Dr Luveni was the first woman in Fiji to graduate as a dentist and had been appointed minister for health, then minister for social welfare, women, and poverty alleviation in Bainimarama's interim government, before successfully running for election in 2014. Like Fiame in Samoa, Dr Luveni would also be called on to defend her parliament's gender mainstreaming mandate. Speaking at the launch of the toolkit that was developed to support the work-in-practice of the standing order, Dr Luveni noted:

> In Fiji, I am glad to say that we are at the forefront of efforts to mainstream gender in the works of Parliament. We are one of, if not the only, Parliament in the world that has Standing Orders that makes it mandatory for Standing Committees to consider the issue of gender in their work and reflect it in their reports. (Luveni, 2016)

5. Contested Norms in Samoa and Fiji?

In line with the work of Acharya (2004) and Wiener (2018), we argue that a second requirement of norm localisation involves a form of contestation (as either an objection to or critical engagement with) the norm (see Palmieri & Baker, 2022). We now consider the extent to which both Samoa's gender quota and Fiji's gender mainstreaming requirement have been subject to contestation. Interestingly, since their adoption, realignment elections in both countries (2021 in Samoa and 2022 in Fiji) have resulted in significantly different political environments.

5.1. Contestation of the Samoan Gender Quota

The 2021 election presented a dramatic break with continuity for Samoan politics. In the previous election, the HRPP had dominated, with their endorsed or affiliated candidates winning 94% of the seats. In the lead-up to the 2021 election, however, splits within the party emerged over various issues, including controversial changes to the status of the Land & Titles Court, an institution that dealt with customary matters relating to land tenure and *matai* titles. In September 2020, Fiame—then deputy prime minister—resigned from cabinet in protest over these changes. In early 2021, she announced she was joining the newly formed opposition party Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST), accepting their invitation to become the party's leader. The rise of FAST as a political force fundamentally changed the dynamics of Samoa's politics.

This election put the parliamentary gender quota firmly into the spotlight. The 9 April poll had seen five women elected, including Fiame who ran unopposed, which led many to assume that the constitutional threshold had been met. But it delivered a deadlocked result, with the HRPP and FAST winning 25 seats each, and one seat

won by an independent (Alofaituli, 2022). As each party entered negotiations with the sole independent MP, two rumours began to gain currency: first, that FAST had the upper hand in the negotiations, and second, that the appointment of a sixth woman MP might be imminent. The second rumour was based on a reading of the quota provision which emphasised the threshold as 10%. Since parliament had increased in size since the constitutional amendment was adopted—from 49 to 51 seats—five women MPs no longer constituted 10% of the parliament.

On the evening of 20 April, the head of state issued a warrant of election appointing Ali'imalemanu Alofa Tuuau, a former HRPP member who had lost her seat to a FAST candidate, to parliament as the highest-polling unsuccessful woman election candidate. The next day, FAST publicly secured the support of the sole independent MP, meaning parliament was again deadlocked, this time with each side claiming 26 seats. On 4 May, the head of state issued the writs for a second general election. Both the appointment of a sixth woman MP and the calling of a second election were challenged in court by FAST.

As a series of tense and protracted court battles waged, the constitutional crisis deepened. Debates were often centred around competing interpretations of the gender quota legislation. The HRPP mobilised supporters to demand a more expansive interpretation of the quota provision, through social media posts and a women's empowerment march in Apia. FAST criticised this interpretation, calling the appointment of a sixth woman MP "a clear side step and a misuse of the law and the constitution" (Jackson, 2021). Yet FAST also presented itself as supportive of women's political rights, emphasising the importance of Fiame's leadership (see Baker & Corbett, 2023; Baker & Palmieri, 2023).

Ultimately, a court of appeal ruling in July 2021 paved the way for FAST to form the government—and for Fiame to become Samoa's first woman prime minister. Even as the constitutional crisis was resolved, however, questions remain over the future of the parliamentary gender quota. The final court of appeal judgement cited issues with the drafting of the quota amendment, noting "mixed messages, confusion and an ambiguity of ideas" in the legislation that contributed to the constitutional crisis (*Electoral Commissioner & Anor v. Faatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi & Anor*, 2021, p. 3). A Commission of Inquiry into the 2021 election recommended reviewing the provision; it was claimed that the majority of submissions to the inquiry did not support the quota provisions (Keresoma, 2023). After the report was tabled, a parliamentary committee initially proposed removing the quota but later moderated their position to amend it with clearer wording ("Samoa Parliament agrees," 2023).

5.2. Contestation of Gender Mainstreaming in Fiji

Somewhat similarly in Fiji, the December 2022 election resulted in the ousting of the Bainimarama administration after 16 years in power. In its place, a new party, the People's Alliance Party, led by another "coup leader turned civilian prime minister," Sitiveni Rabuka, formed a governing coalition with a narrowly-held majority (Fraenkel, 2023). With its election slogan of "let the love shine"—a euphemism for greater transparency and accountability—the Rabuka government came into power with great expectations (Kant & Baker, 2023). For a start, civil society expected to be able to make a stronger contribution to policy-making through parliamentary processes following years of executive-legislative interactions being "biased in favour of the executive" (Kant, 2022).

These expectations reflect the extreme difficulties faced by civil society actors in engaging with the autocratic Bainimarama administration. Any form of government critique, including the expression of opposition from important institutions of civil society was suppressed under the 2013 constitution. Civil society organisations were heavily monitored and repressed (Regan et al., 2023). In this context, it was not common practice for women's and feminist organisations to make parliamentary submissions that would present committees with the kind of information and research required to consider adequately, let alone reduce, gender inequalities in specific inquiries. While most committee reports prepared to include a section on "gender," the analysis typically reported whether organisations related to the topic of inquiry employed an equal number of men and women (Palmieri & Nailumu, in press). Committees have not assessed (and/or have been reluctant to assess) the differential impact on men and women of all legislation, policies and programs in line with the international understanding of gender mainstreaming. The political make-up of parliamentary committees in Fiji has also meant that government members—not only as chairs but as numerically dominant—always controlled the agenda and the discussion. These government members closely followed the direction of the prime minister and the attorney-general. In this sense, it would be fair to characterise the Bainimarama regime's approach to gender equality as merely "genderwashing" (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022)—accepting an international consultant's proposal for gender mainstreaming in parliament could be seen as little more than an attempt to divert the international community's gaze from broader human rights abuses and limited democratic freedoms. Indeed, this reform was referenced in the Fiji government's reply to the CEDAW Committee following its appearance in 2018 as an example of a "gender impact assessment" (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2018, p. 4).

To some extent, there has been some internal contestation of the workability of the standing order. In 2016, the UNDP's dedicated parliamentary strengthening project in Fiji sought to expand the skills of MPs and parliamentary staff in undertaking gender analyses. A parliamentary officer from the Global North was seconded to work as a clerk to the parliamentary committees for five months. The secondment intended to support a more detailed understanding of the Fiji parliamentary system, as well as the political and social context, in the development of a toolkit.

Yet even with a relatively strong toolkit, gender analysis of key legislation could be considered ineffective. A good example is electoral legislation passed in the lead-up to the 2022 election. In response to a High Court ruling, the Bainimarama administration introduced changes to the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Act 2012 requiring the names registered on the electoral roll to match that on an individual's birth certificate. Women's rights organisations argued that these amendments had gender discriminatory consequences: married women were likely to be disenfranchised. Rather than presenting these arguments to the parliament, however, seven women filed a constitutional challenge on the grounds of sex, gender, and marital status discrimination, but also in light of the likely violation of privacy for 100,000 Fijian women (see Kant, 2022).

The provision requiring committees to consider the principle of gender equality has remained in the standing orders following the 2022 election and the establishment of a new parliament. This parliament, however, has arguably taken a more diluted approach to its implementation. Rather than having a separate section relating to gender equality, parliamentary reports since 2022 have tended to present an analysis of the relevance of the sustainable development goals.

6. Conclusion: Implications for Norm Localisation

There are useful lessons to be heeded from the introduction of these gender equality reforms in Samoa and Fiji—not just for the region, but globally. In the process of contextualization, we note three important findings. First, the wording of the reform is instructive. The "10%" law is uniquely Samoan, drafted by Samoans. It was determined that the quota would represent "a floor," rather than a ceiling, and represented no threat to the *matai* system. Conversely, standing order 110(2) is an internationally phrased reform, drafted by an international consultant, without any attempt at "grafting" onto the Fijian parliamentary (or political) system.

Second, international reputation matters. In the case of Fiji, the reform came into effect as Bainimarama was trying to reassert himself as a good international citizen who abided—at least rhetorically—by internationally recognized democratic values. The Samoan reform was also influenced by international norms, with the government acknowledging its low ranking on global league tables of women in politics as part of the impetus for quota adoption. In both these cases we can see a form of "genderwashing" (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022), with autocratic male leaders instituting gender reforms to bolster democratic legitimacy.

Third, male leaders' involvement in reform establishment is vital. Women leaders in both Samoa and Fiji recognised the cultural value of male leaders taking responsibility for the reforms. This is not, however, to deny the critical role women played either behind the scenes or subsequently in the promotion or socialization of the reforms, nationally, regionally, and internationally.

On the process of contestation, we note that in Samoa, there has been a very public contestation both electorally and through the courts, with calls for clearer wording of the reform provision. As noted above (Section 5.1), following a commission of inquiry into the 2021 election, a parliamentary committee proposed removing the quota altogether. A survey carried out shortly before the 2021 election, however, found 78% support for the statement "There should be temporary special measures to increase women's representation in parliament" (Leach et al., 2022). In Fiji, given public contestation was outlawed during the 16 years of the former administration, it is not surprising that the norm has not been localised. While the Samoan reform has improved the specific gender inequality it intended to reverse (the under-representation of women in parliament), the same cannot be said of the gender mainstreaming mandate in Fiji. The lesson in Fiji rather is that there is a world of difference between a public commitment to an international norm and the local cultural acceptance of that norm.

What then of these reforms' effectiveness in reducing gender equality? Samoa's gender quota legislation sets a modest minimum level of women's representation at 10% of parliamentary seats. While it has been used to bolster the number of women in politics, it has also been used by political actors to seek to maintain power (and to prevent the appointment of a woman prime minister). In the case of the Samoan parliament, the gender quota demonstrates that newer institutions can be more amenable to gender equality reforms, yet it is only seen as acceptable insofar as the (masculinised) structures of political power remain unchanged. Despite the implementation of the quota, other established aspects of Samoa's political system that might disadvantage aspiring women candidates remain unchanged. One notable barrier to greater women's representation is the *matai*-only eligibility rule. This substantially restricts the number of potential women candidates: just 3% of women aged 21 and over residing in Samoa hold at least one *matai* title, compared to 28% of men (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Public opinion on the rule is divided: A 2021 survey

reported that 50% of respondents approved the *matai*-only eligibility, with 49% disapproving. Notably, male respondents reported a higher degree of support for *matai*-only eligibility than women did (Leach et al., 2022). Yet there seems to be little interest among political actors to change candidature requirements.

From an international perspective, Fiji's standing order 110(2) meets the highest normative standard in terms of a gender equality parliamentary reform. It has been institutionalised in so far as it remains a provision of the rules of parliament; it requires that the responsibility for mainstreaming is shared across all parliamentary committees rather than making it the work of one gender-focused committee; and it requires attention to the principle of gender equality in the oversight of bills, petitions, and government departments' annual reports. Yet its (in)effectiveness in improving gender equality outcomes in Fiji is—at least in part—related to broader practices of parliamentary democracy, including an open and accountable relationship between parliament and civil society organisations. Parliament's choice of gender organisations and experts to partner with, and the degree to which parliament engages those organisations, is political. Seeking submissions from, and then including the research and expertise of, civil society organisations is part of the democratic process. There is still room for improvement in this regard in Fiji.

Global normative frameworks are essential to the gender equality project. They set much-needed aspirational targets for all peoples and governments in eliminating all forms of gender-based discrimination. Yet their local translation cannot be taken for granted. Processes of contextualisation and contestation make these global aspirations relevant and tangible outcomes. In this article, our underlying motivation has been to demonstrate the futility of a one-size-fits-all approach to that translation process. By contrasting the adoption and implementation of gender equality parliamentary reforms in Samoa and Fiji, we have shown that there is a need to support parliaments in navigating their own bespoke culturally sensitive paths towards norm localisation.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Passing the Sexual Violence Crime Law in Indonesia: Reflection of a Gender-Sensitive Parliament?

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Abstract

After a decade of deliberation, the draft sexual violence eradication bill was finally passed by the Indonesian parliament on 12 April 2022, enacted as the Sexual Violence Crime Law (*Undang-Undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual*). The draft, which was first initiated by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (*Komnas Perempuan*) and later adopted as a parliamentary initiative, sparked controversy both inside and outside parliament. This article aims to describe the law-making process and identify the critical actors and acts as well as institutional responses that led to the passing of the law. It considers whether the experience can be interpreted as a reflection of a gender-sensitive parliament. Using a qualitative research approach, we identified critical actors and various responses from the parliament as an institution in responding to the dynamics of resistance and encouragement for the draft law to be passed. Our research material consists of interviews, news articles, and official document data. We found that critical actors and actions are key in the law-making process along with strong political will and collaboration between lawmakers, government representatives, civil society organizations, and the media, but the passage of this legislation alone does not fulfill the full requirement of a gender-sensitive parliament.

Keywords

civil society organizations; critical actors; gender-sensitive parliament; Indonesia; sexual violence; women's movement

1. Introduction

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017, p. 5) stipulates a gender-sensitive parliament (GSP) as a parliament that "responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its composition, structures, operations,

methods and work." A GSP also removes "the barriers to women's full participation and offers a positive example or model to society at large." Many parliaments around the world are enacting reforms to become more gender-sensitive institutions (Childs & Palmieri, 2023). These adjustments include, but are not limited to, gender quotas (International IDEA, 2023; Kim & Fallon, 2023), gender-sensitive electoral systems (Pilon, 2020), and political party reforms (Verge, 2018).

Building on the 2001 Gender Sensitizing Commonwealth Parliaments Report, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association published the 2020 Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines in which gender (in)sensitivity is to be measured across four dimensions (Childs, 2020). The first dimension deals with equality of participation within parliament, questioning selection processes, and whether MPs are enabled to become effective participants across parliament's core activities: representation and interest articulation, legislative scrutiny, and executive accountability. The second dimension is parliamentary infrastructure, which covers everything that facilitates the work of MPs, including official rules and working practices that underpin all activities in the parliament. The next dimension is parliamentary culture, which is never fixed but rather evolving and subject to change, such as informal institutional norms, practices, and processes. Lastly, dimension four which is gender equality policy/women's substantive representation. This dimension would include legislation, policy, scrutiny, and interest representation by asking whether parliaments acknowledge the perspectives and address the needs and interests of women. Do parliaments aim for gender equality between men and women, and have women's experiences been considered?

Several works have investigated the progress of achieving a GSP in Indonesia, particularly in terms of increasing the number of women in the lower house (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* [DPR]; Bessell, 2005; Prihatini, 2020; Purwanti, 2015), and a few studies have examined the connection between women's presence and gender-sensitive legislation and policy (Jovani et al., 2020; Maryuni, 2022; Prihatini, 2022). However, systematically observing the issuance of pro-women legislation promoting and protecting gender equality in the world's fourth-most populous and third-largest democracy remains limited.

To fill this gap, our article seeks to examine the fourth dimension of a GSP in the DPR by delving into the Eradication of Sexual Violence Bill (*Rancangan Undang-Undang Penghapusan Kekerasan Seksual* [RUU PKS]), which was passed under the name Sexual Violence Crime Law (*Undang-undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual* [UU TPKS]) after almost a decade of on-and-off deliberation. Using a qualitative research approach with in-depth interviews and textual analysis of news articles and official documents, we identified critical actors and various responses from parliament to the dynamics of support and opposition toward the Bill being passed.

Our findings contribute to the growing literature on GSPs, specifically possibilities and complexities in the Global South. Examining Indonesia's experience is pivotal for at least two reasons. First, Indonesia has achieved notable progress in electing women into parliament following the end of an authoritarian regime, from 8% in 1999 to 21% in 2019 (Prihatini, 2022). The passing of the Sexual Violence Bill offers an important observation on whether increased women's presence translates into better substantive representation. Second, considering that religion and culture are frequently cited as barriers to advancing gender equality (Norris & Inglehart, 2002; Rizzo et al., 2007), the experience of establishing anti-sexual violence legislation in Indonesia extends our knowledge around such dynamics. The article critically discusses the political and religious contexts encompassing one of the most progressive pieces of legal reform in the world's largest Muslim society.

To set the context of a GSP in Indonesia, the following section discusses women's rights and parliamentary reforms that aim to promote gender equality. The next section details data collection and analysis, alongside the legislative process. We then elaborate on the Bill as a case study to demonstrate the dynamics in pursuing gender-sensitive legislation in the DPR. Consequently, we identify the actors and their critical acts based on news reports and in-depth interviews with MPs and the former chairperson of *Komnas Perempuan* to indicate causal inference of the important change. We conclude by providing key takeaways and further research avenues for GSPs in the Indonesian context.

2. Women's Rights and Parliamentary Reforms

In its 1945 Constitution, the Republic of Indonesia acknowledged gender equality in all aspects of life including socio-economic and political rights. The state guarantees at least 40 constitutional rights, which can be categorized into 14 clusters including the right to legal certainty and justice, the right to be free from threats, discrimination, and violence, and the right to protection. The state aims to protect the whole population by providing safety for all citizens, but in particular, groups that are more vulnerable, such as women, children, and people with disabilities (Jaringan Masyarakat Sipil & Komnas Perempuan, 2020).

Gender-equal political rights as stipulated in Chapter X, Article 27 of the Constitution, have provided the opportunity for women to participate in politics as voters and candidates. Women have voted in every general election since the first one held in 1955. The first female minister was appointed in 1946 and the first female president was inaugurated in 2001 (Prihatini, 2023). However, during the New Order Era (1966–1998), women's political representation was suppressed, and women were to focus on their roles as wives and mothers (*ibu*). Their concern with the well-being of others (family, company, or the state) was linked to the "mother" concept, where women act without demanding power or prestige in return (*state ibuism*; Suryakusuma, 1996).

On the other hand, in line with the global trend that has taken place in the last couple of decades, Indonesia has ratified international conventions and United Nations' resolutions that promote women's rights and gender equality (Wardhani, 2019). One pinnacle of this commitment was the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1984. Indonesia also agreed to adopt the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, which highlights 12 critical areas that need to be resolved, including women's political representation and violence against women.

Following the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, massive political and institutional reforms provided activists with opportunities to advocate for women's rights, including political representation (Bessell, 2010). For example, a candidate gender quota was introduced for the 2004 elections, requiring parties to nominate a minimum of 30% women (Prihatini, 2019). This requirement was first constituted in Law 12/2003 on general elections, followed by Law 2/2008 on political parties, which required parties to appoint women to at least 30% of their national managerial positions and regional boards. Law 8/2008 and Law 8/2012 mandated that 30% female candidates were compulsory, and parties must nominate candidates with at least 30% women using the zipper system or face disqualification from running.

Reflecting on the experience of four election cycles in 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019, the affirmative action policy of a legislated gender quota has yet to significantly improve women's electability. Their share in

parliament was 11%, 18%, 17%, and 21% respectively. Furthermore, the percentage of female legislators coming from a political dynasty has increased from 42% in 2009 to 44% in 2014 (Puskapol FISIP UI, 2014) and to 47% in 2019 (Prihatini & Halimatusa'diyah, 2024). Kania (2015) suggests women's stronger presence in the DPR does not guarantee better efforts to improve gender equality and does not serve women's interests. She argues that between 1998 and 2008 was the most progressive period in terms of protecting human rights, as multiple laws were passed: Law 39/1999 on human rights (where Chapter 9 specifically deals with women's rights and Article 45 reads "women's rights in this law are human rights"), Law 12/2006 on citizenship (which grants dual citizenship to children in mixed marriages before they are 18 years old or married), and Law 2/2008 on political parties (that regulates the inclusion of 30% representation of women in the formation of political parties and the management board).

Prior to 2022, the DPR had passed laws that recognized forms of sexual violence (although still limited), namely Law 23/2004, concerning the elimination of domestic violence; Law 35/2014, concerning child protection; and Law 21/2007, concerning the eradication of the crime of human trafficking. Yet, these laws could only be used for sexual violence that occurs within a limited scope: the victim is a victim of domestic violence, a child, or a victim of the crime of human trafficking. Article 285 of the 1946 Penal Code defines rape (*perkosaan*) as acts of forced sexual intercourse involving male genitalia penetrating the vagina; meanwhile, molestation (*pencabulan*) is used to describe other forms of forced sexual acts. Lastly, intercourse (*persetubuhan*) is defined as sexual activity performed on an unconscious woman. These three activities are indisputably rape, yet due to their different classifications, perpetrators of *persetubuhan* would get the lightest punishment, while *pencabulan* is lighter than *perkosaan* (Yentriyani, 2023). Sexual harassment and many other forms of sexual abuse were not mentioned in the 1946 Penal Code or in existing laws. Thus, proponents of the Sexual Violence Bill strongly argued that Indonesia urgently needed a specific law protecting women from sexual crime and adopting the concept of an integrated criminal justice system for handling cases of violence against women.

3. Data, Methods, and Legislative Process

Extant research has examined the potential of key actors and their critical acts in parliaments to show how gender equality can be promoted in parliamentary situations where women are still a minority and where the overall climate does not necessarily support such policies. Mushaben (2019) concludes that by the mid-1990s, women's critical acts significantly improved the gender climate and expanded opportunities for female legislative contribution, increasing their share of European Parliament seats from 19.3% in 1992 to 26.5% in 1997. She also contends that critical acts carried out by strategically situated women, rather than critical mass, provided the framework for the EU's embrace of gender mainstreaming following the 1995 United Nations Beijing Conference. The European Parliament has made real attempts to operationalize gender mainstreaming over the last few years, although its constituent bodies, namely permanent committees, have been slow to achieve the basic prerequisites.

On the other hand, the Justice and Development Party (abbreviated officially as AKP in English), which has ruled Turkey since 2002, has increased the visibility of conservative and Islamist women in politics. This has not resulted in improved representation for women or any other type of structural change (Ayata & Tütüncü, 2008); instead, women are positioned as an auxiliary for vote mobilization. Scholars argue that gender issues have been submerged under ideological discussions over Islam, secularism, and Westernization. For example, the headscarf controversy has become the focal point of Turkish politics since the 1980s until today.

In delving into the experience of key actors involved and their critical acts in the process of passing the Bill, we approached MPs and *Komnas Perempuan*. Via an online video call platform, we arranged in-depth interviews with Hon. Willy Aditya (male, National Democratic Party/*Partai Nasional Demokrat* [NasDem]), Hon. Kurniasih Mufidayati (female, Prosperous Justice Party/*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* [PKS]), and Azriana Manalu (female, chairperson of *Komnas Perempuan*, 2015–2019) in December 2023. All sessions were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. We applied a semi-structured interview approach to gain insights from respondents with guiding questions, such as "Who were the critical actors in the process of passing the Bill?", "What factors shaped the dynamics of the legislative process?", "To what extent did religious conservatism correspond with how the parties perceived the Bill?", and "To what degree are you now happy with the Law and its implementation today?"

The selection of interviewees was conducted purposefully as we gathered information from both proponents and opponents of the Bill. As the chair of the Working Committee (*Panitia Kerja* [Panja]) for the Bill, Hon. Willy Aditya provided critical reflections on the political dynamics and debates surrounding the legislative process. We consider that his involvement represents a critical act (Childs & Krook, 2008) by a male lawmaker as he worked towards achieving consensus for a Bill that promotes women's rights. We also interviewed Hon. Kurniasih Mufidayati to gain insights from her faction which consistently opposed the Bill. Lastly, Azriana Manalu offered *Komnas Perempuan*'s critical assessment of factors contributing to years of delay in passing the Bill.

We also analyzed news articles from *The Jakarta Post*, an English daily newspaper with significant readership. Using the keyword "sexual violence bill," we collected a total of 139 articles as of 19 September 2023. We also searched online news articles in Bahasa Indonesia (including *Kompas* and *CNN Indonesia*) to better understand news coverage on the Bill. Additionally, we collected official documents from the DPR's official website, which provided us with summaries of meetings/hearings with key stakeholders, and, most importantly, factions' perspectives, including their notes, requests, and suggestions regarding the Bill.

The legislative process in Indonesia is divided into five stages: planning, drafting, deliberation, ratification, and promulgation (see Table 1). The Legislative Board/*Badan Legislatif* (Baleg) is a permanent body in the DPR, or the lower house, that focuses on law-making. The size of the Baleg is twice that of a committee and it represents all parliamentary factions. For example, in the 2019–2024 legislature, the Baleg comprises 80 MPs (representing nine factions), including a chairperson and four deputies. The Baleg develops the National Legislation Program (*Program Legislasi Nasional* [Prolegnas]), a planning instrument for the law-making program, which is prepared in an integrated and systematic manner.

According to the Constitution (Article 20), a Bill can be proposed to the lower house (DPR) by MPs, a committee (or an alliance of committees), the upper house (*Dewan Perwakilan Daerah* [DPD]), or the president. Yet, the DPD's bills can only be in matters relating to regional autonomy, central and regional relations, formation, expansion, and merger of regions, management of natural resources and other economic resources, and matters related to the balance of central and regional finances. The Constitution also stipulates that every bill will be discussed by the DPR and the president to obtain joint approval.

Table 1. Legislative process in Indonesia's DPR.

Stage	Activity
Planning	• The Baleg prepares the Prolegnas, inviting comment from faction heads, committee leaders, and the public through Public Hearing Meetings (*Rapat Dengar Pendapat* [RDP]). • The Baleg coordinates with the Law Drafting Committee of the DPR and the Minister of Law and Human Rights to prepare and determine the Prolegnas. • The DPR determines the annual and medium-term Prolegnas (5 years).
Drafting	Activities are carried out by each party who will propose a bill, including: • Preparation of academic submissions; • Bill drafting; • Bill harmonization (up to 20 days after bill is received by the Baleg); • Deciding who will become the bill's initiator (up to 20 days); • Bill review by the president (if the bill is DPR's initiative) or submission to the DPR (if the bill comes from the government or DPD); • Bill discussion (within 60 days after the letter is received by the president).
Deliberation	1. Introduction to Deliberation: Bill presented, including with president's views; 2. Submission of "inventory of concerns" (DIM). Opinions expressed by all parliamentary factions; the DPD, if the bill relates to the DPD's authority; and the president. In parallel to the deliberation process: • The minister, representing the president, considers strategic issues and macro policy options. • The Working Committee (Panja) considers in more depth the matters mandated by the Working Meeting. • The Drafting Team (*Tim Perumus* [Timus]) and Synchronization Team (*Tim Sinkronisasi* [Timsin]) consider each chapter and verse carefully. • Public Hearing Meetings (*Rapat Dengar Pendapat* [RDP]) with relevant government agencies and the general public gather submissions.
Ratification	Ratification occurs following: • Submission of a report of the deliberations; • Statement of approval or rejection from each faction; if an agreement cannot be reached through consensus, decision will made by a vote; • The final opinion of the president conveyed by the assigned minister. The Bill that has been jointly approved by the DPR and the president must be submitted within 7 days to the President to be ratified. Where a Bill is not ratified by the president after 30 days, the Bill remains valid to become a Law and must be promulgated.
Promulgation	A Bill that has been passed by the DPR is promulgated in the *State Gazette of the Republic of Indonesia*.

Sources: Law 12/2011 and Law 19/2019 on Formation of Legislative Regulations (DPR, 2011, 2019).

4. Sexual Violence Bill

Komnas Perempuan has collected data on violence against women from service providers, hospitals, police, and courts since 2008. The number of cases of violence against women increased almost eight times between 2008 and 2019 (see Figure 1). *Komnas Perempuan* noted that from 2011 to 2019, 46,698 cases of sexual violence occurred in the personal, household, and public domains. Of that number, 23,021 cases occurred in the public domain, in the form of rape (9,039 cases), sexual harassment (2,861 cases), and cybercrime with sexual nuances (91 cases). The 2016 National Women's Life Experience Survey (SPPHN), carried out by the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's and Children's Empowerment (KPPA), also demonstrates the high incidence of violence against women. Survey results for women aged 15 to 64 years suggest that one in three experienced physical and/or sexual violence by partners and non-partners during their lifetime, and around 1 in 10 women had experienced it in the last 12 months (United Nations Population Fund, 2017). Physical and/or sexual violence tends to be higher among women living in urban areas (36.3%) than in rural areas (29.8%). Physical and/or sexual violence is more often experienced by employed women with a high school educational background or above (39.4%) than those who are unemployed (35.1%).

The Eradication of Sexual Violence Bill goes back to 2010 when *Komnas Perempuan* conducted a 10-year review of CATAHU (short for *Catatan Tahunan*/Annual Report) and found a startling trend of increasing reports of sexual violence against women and girls (Yentriyani, 2023). On average, sexual violence cases account for a quarter of reported cases of violence against women, which means at least two women experience sexual violence every three hours. Following the review, *Komnas Perempuan* and its networks, including the Service Providers Forum (*Forum Pengada Layanan* [FPL]; a forum of integrated service units to help victims of violence against women that exist in provinces throughout Indonesia), dedicated five consecutive years to document
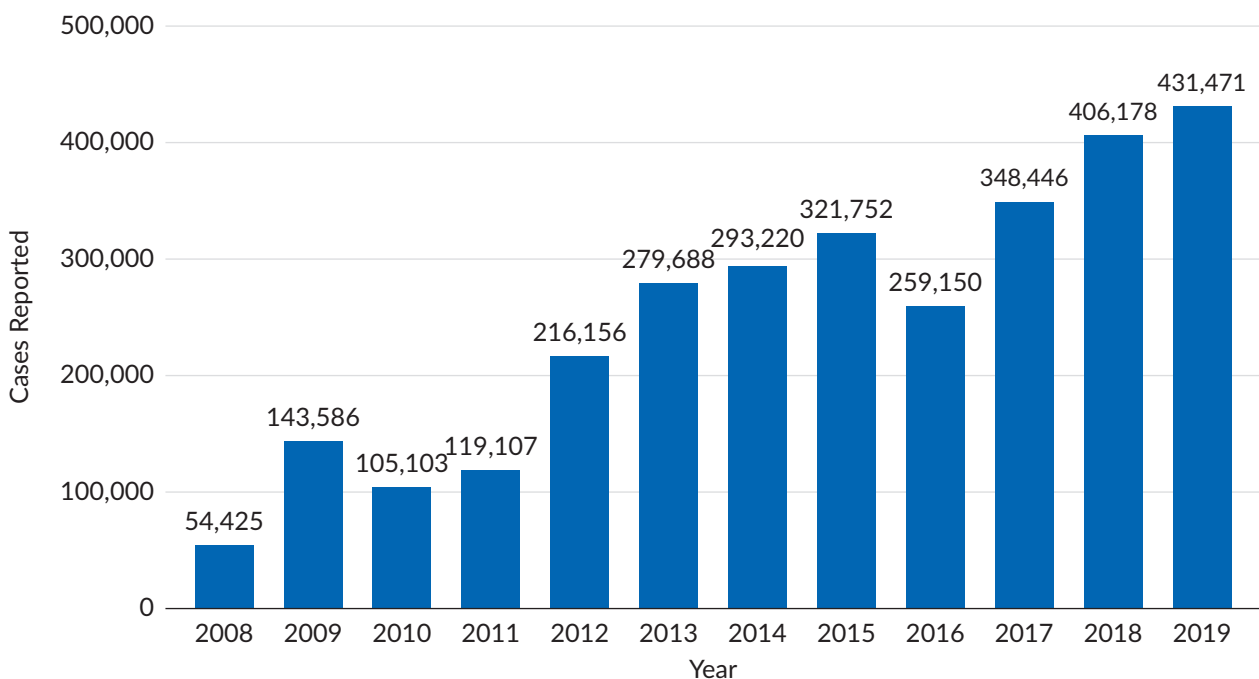

Figure 1. Number of cases of violence against women between 2008 and 2019. Source: Jaringan Masyarakat Sipil and Komnas Perempuan (2020).

and further study reported sexual violence cases. It also introduced the nationwide campaign Recognizing and Handling Sexual Violence.

Komnas Perempuan (2013) further identified 15 types of sexual violence: (a) rape; (b) sexual intimidation, including threat or attempted rape; (c) sexual harassment; (d) sexual exploitation; (e) sex trafficking of women or girls; (f) forced prostitution; (g) sexual slavery; (h) forced marriage, including divorce (when a woman wants to get divorced but is forced to remain in the marriage); (i) forced pregnancy; (j) forced abortion; (k) forced contraception and sterilization; (l) sexual torture or abuse; (m) inhumane punishment with sexual overtones; (n) traditional customs with sexual nuances that are dangerous or discriminatory toward women; and (o) sexual control, including discriminatory regulations using morality or religious reasons. However, *Komnas Perempuan* listed only six forms of violence as basis for the draft bill on sexual violence: rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, sexual control, sexual torture, and sexually charged punishment. Ira Harsono, commissioner of *Komnas Perempuan*, acknowledged it was too difficult to insert all 15 types into the bill, "although the bill only stipulates six types of sexual violence, we are making [broader] definitions and elements that in the end can accommodate all 15 types," as quoted by *The Jakarta Post* (Afrida, 2015).

During the preparation process, *Komnas Perempuan* held 132 meetings with various stakeholders. In 2015, *Komnas Perempuan* completed the Eradication of Sexual Violence Bill draft which advocates for a paradigm shift paradigm from sexual violence as a morality issue, as set out in the 1946 Penal Code, to a human rights issue. The draft was officially proposed to the DPR following a gang rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl in Bengkulu in 2016, a case that sparked public outrage because of the brutality of the attack (Ramadhani & Muryanto, 2019). Similar attacks occurred in Manado (North Sulawesi), Tangerang (Banten), North Sumatra, and Jakarta.

Before the Bill was sent to parliament, *Komnas Perempuan* reported and discussed it with President Joko Widodo. The president supported the Bill (Parlina & Aritonang, 2016) and the Baleg agreed the draft Bill would become a priority at Prolegnas in 2016 (Susiana, 2021). The Deputy Head of the Baleg, Totok Daryanto from the National Mandate Party (*Partai Amanat Nasional* [PAN]), said, "We agreed to put the draft Bill on Prolegnas according to the urgency of the Bill" (DPR, 2016). In 2017, the DPR approved the draft as a DPR initiative bill. However, the parliament decided to postpone discussing the draft until after the 2019 elections because it was considered too controversial.

The Bill timeline (Table 2) illustrates the continual tug of war between Bill supporters and opponents. Major media platforms suggested the strongest rejection came from Islamist parties such as PKS and the United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* [PPP]). While PKS has rejected the Bill entirely on the grounds that it had a "liberal perspective," PPP was less up-front by requiring the bill to conform to existing ethical and religious values (Ramadhani, 2019).

There are also important contextual factors surrounding the passage of the Bill, as gleaned in reports by *The Jakarta Post*. Firstly, while Indonesian political party positions are often similar on economic policy, they differ on the role of Islam in politics (Fossati et al., 2020). These differences were often asserted in media reports as the biggest hurdle in passing the Bill. Second, the initial introduction of this legislation occurred at a time when the Indonesian parliament had its worst legislative performance since the start of the Reform

Table 2. Sexual Crime Bill timeline, 2012–2022.

Date	Event	Actor
2012	*Komnas Perempuan* together with civil society groups initiate the Eradication of Sexual Violence (RUU PKS) Bill.	*Komnas Perempuan* and civil society groups
May 2016	Draft RUU PKS Bill and academic manuscript submitted to DPR by *Komnas Perempuan* and FPL.	*Komnas Perempuan* and FPL
Jun 2016	Seventy MPs propose to include the draft in the 2016 Priority Prolegnas. The Bill comprises 12 chapters, covering prevention, victim handling, prosecution, and rehabilitation. *Komnas Perempuan* and FPL submit draft Bill to President Joko Widodo.	Initiators: Nihayatul Wafiroh (National Awakening Party/*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* [PKB]) and Ammy Amalia (PAN)
Mar 2017	Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture from 2014 to 2019, Puan Maharani (speaker of the House 2019–2024), said the Bill must be passed immediately.	Puan Maharani (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle/*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan* [PDI-P])
Apr 2017	DPR agrees to the Bill as parliamentary initiative.	DPR
Dec 2017	2018 Priority Prolegnas includes Bill among 50 other bills.	Rahayu Saraswati (The Great Indonesia Movement Party/*Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya* [Gerindra]) and Diah Pitaloka (PDI-P)
Feb 2019	Deliberation of Bill postponed until after 2019 election. PKS rejects Bill, claiming the definition of sexual violence is too liberal and not in accordance with the state's ideology (Pancasila), religious beliefs, and culture.	PKS
Dec 2019	2020 Priority Prolegnas includes Bill, with new MPs and new ministers sworn-in in October 2019.	Baleg
Jun 2020	The Baleg evaluates 2020 Priority Prolegnas and proposes to withdraw Bill along other bills, because of controversies.	Baleg
Mar 2021	Proposed by NasDem, PDI-P, and PKB, the 2021 Priority Prolegnas includes the Bill.	Taufik Basari (NasDem), Diah Pitaloka (PDI-P), and Luluk Nur Hamidah (PKB)
Sep 2021	Renaming of Bill from Eradication of Sexual Violence Bill (RUU PKS) to Sexual Violence Crime Bill (RUU TPKS). Deputy Chair of the Baleg, Willy Aditya, reasoned it is to make the Bill more "down to earth." Four factions agree, two ask for postponement (Party of Functional Groups/*Partai Golongan Karya* [Golkar] and PPP).	Deputy Chair of the Baleg Willy Aditya
Dec 2021	The Baleg approves the Bill as DPR's initiative. Seven factions agree, one faction asks for postponement, one faction rejects.	Golkar: postpone, PKS: reject
Jan 2022	President Joko Widodo publicly appeals to the DPR to pass the Bill (4 January 2022). Bill officially passed as DPR initiative on 18 January 2022 (DPR, 2022b). Except for PKS, all factions approve the Bill (with notes and suggestions to the Bill).	President Joko Widodo

Table 2. (Cont.) Sexual Crime Bill timeline, 2012–2022.

Date	Event	Actor
Jan–Mar 2022	Working Committee discusses government's DIM. Substance harmonization by Drafting Team (Timus) and Synchronization Team (Timsin).	Baleg, Formulation Team, Synchronization Team
Apr 2022	DPR adopts Bill during 19th Plenary Meeting, Session IV, in the 2021–2022 sitting period. The speaker of the House, Puan Maharani, chaired the session.	Speaker of the House Puan Maharani

Sources: Cakra Wikara Indonesia (2022); "Ketua Panja sebut" (2021); Permana (2022).

Era in 1998; in the 2014–2019 House, only 68 bills passed, including 24 of which were priority bills. This is significantly lower than the 92 passed by the 2009–2014 House (Tehusijarana, 2019). Third, according to Diah Pitaloka (PDI-P), a member of the Working Committee for the Bill, most (male) MPs lacked any gender sensitivity. Related to this, media reports noted a rise in populist politics, by which they considered fewer politicians appeared to show interest toward human rights issues ("Gender violence still rampant," 2018).

5. Identifying Key Actors and Critical Acts

While scholars argue that the passage of the Bill was about clash of values between religious conservatism and liberal nationalism (Pawestri & Mann, 2022; Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023; Yentriyani, 2023), Willy Aditya strongly refused this kind of dichotomy and weaponization. He stated:

> No, this is not about Islamists' versus nationalists' groups in the parliament. Both men and women, Islamist and nationalist MPs are supporting the initiative in providing a specific law that regulates sexual violence crimes. However, some lawmakers from nationalist parties tend to have more conservative views that derive from an embedded patriarchy, and this might continue to hinder [the] DPR from achieving a GSP. For example, during our deliberation sessions, some male colleagues said to me, "Brother, you should be careful, (if the Bill is passed) we could go to jail for catcalling." (Interview on 5 December 2023)

Similarly, Margret and Pandjaitan (2020) argue that resistance toward the Bill in 2019 also came from several chairs of the commission, and individual members of secular nationalist parties who hold conservative views, both male and female. They suggest parties may want to project an image of democracy and pluralism, but they also do not wish to lose support from conservative Muslim voters in the 2020 regional elections if they openly support the Bill.

Reflecting on his experience as the chair of the Working Committee, Willy Aditya asserts that the passage of the Bill is the result of cooperation among key stakeholders: the DPR, the government, civil society organizations, and the media. He further named legislators who have helped to persuade their party leaders (see Table 3). Willy Aditya asserts that endorsement from the president on 4 January 2022 encouraged parties that originally disagreed with the Bill to eventually agree. In his virtual statement, President Joko Widodo said:

> I ordered the Minister of Law and Human Rights as well as the Minister of Women Empowerment and Child Protection to immediately coordinate and consult with the DPR in deliberating the Sexual

Violence Crime Bill so we can have measures to accelerate [the ratification]. I hope that the Sexual Violence Crime Bill will soon be passed so that it can provide maximum protection for victims of sexual violence in our country. (Nugraheny & Krisiandi, 2022)

Aditya further appreciated the continuous advocacy conducted by various women's movements, NGOs, and activists. In particular, he highlighted the work of *Komnas Perempuan* for their national campaigns and extensive research on violence against women. Civil society networks that were also critical in the journey include, but are not limited to, FPL, a Jakarta-based Women's Legal Aid Institute (LBH Apik), and the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID).

Equally crucial for the passing of the Bill was the media that had helped to raise public awareness on sexual violence in Indonesia. The legislative process between 2016 and 2022 became headline news both in print and online media. Azriana Manalu considered that coverage of the media is very important in building the awareness of people toward sexual violence issues, particularly victims:

One day we wanted to take action. We thought maybe it was only a couple of people coming to the action. In fact, on that day more than 2,000 people attended. It was beyond our expectations. They gave us support, and they believed that Bill should be legislated. In any public meeting we made, there were actually many people that were not purposely invited to attend, [but still] attended to participate. (Interview on 7 December 2023)

She further highlighted challenges in passing the Bill that did not only come from the DPR but also from the government. She stated that when they had sent the draft to the government, the team formed by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection deleted 100 articles from the draft, and *Komnas Perempuan*

Table 3. Key actors in the passage of the Bill.

Name (Sex)	Position (Party)
Willy Aditya (male)	Chair of Working Committee/Deputy Chair of the Baleg (NasDem)
Taufik Basari (male)	Member of Working Committee (NasDem)
Supratman Andi Agtas (male)	Chairman of the Baleg (Gerindra)
Luluk Nur Hamidah (female)	Member of Working Committee (PKB)
Diah Pitaloka (female), My Esti Wijayati (female), Selly Andriany Gantina (female)	Members of Working Committee (PDI-P)
Christina Aryani (female), Ade Rossi Khairunnisa (female), Nurul Arifin (female), Supriansa (male)	Members of Working Committee (Golkar)
I Gusti Ayu Bintang Darmawati (female)	Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection
Edward O. S. Hiariej (male)	Deputy Minister of Law and Human Rights 2020–2023
Joko Widodo (male)	President of the Republic of Indonesia
	Various women's movement groups such *Komnas Perempuan*, FPL, Jakarta-based Women's Legal Aid Institute (LBH Apik), and International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID)

Sources: in-depth interviews by the authors and Sinombor (2022).

was not invited to the meetings organized by the government. However, contrary to this, some female MPs were very supportive, and they tried to lobby the heads of factions and party leaders. They also helped *Komnas Perempuan* to meet their party leaders.

As evident in Table 2, the political changes that took place following the 2019 general elections gave a new life to the law-making process. With new MPs, the Working Committee also changed, and this committee took a different approach to the wording of the Bill. Willy Aditya elaborates his views on these critical acts in the parliament's approval of the Bill:

> Last time its name was Eradication of Sexual Violence Bill. While it is true that there is a jurisprudence using the term Eradication of Sexual Violence, philosophically it was hard to make an operational framework. Then with the name of sexual violence, anatomically its definition will always come first. [The] type of sexual violence will be at the front. It is one of the reasons why there are so many debates surrounding the draft. This is also the reason why this law has [not] yet concluded in Committee VIII. Just imagine if the terminology and the type of sexual violence took a yearlong of discussion; at this pace, the law will never be legislated.

The second critical act is uncovered in the intensive dialogues between the parties, individuals, and organizations who shared the same concerns on sexual violence issues. For example, following extensive discussions with bill proponents, the Deputy Minister of Law and Human Rights Edward O. S. Hiariej (who represented the government during the deliberation process) was persuaded by the change in the title of the Bill. He considered the new name "a bridge for the deadlock." He said, "Types of sexual violence were no longer placed at the front. But more explanation on crime offenses."

Extensive dialogues were also held with party leaders and their wives. Diah Pitaloka, chairperson of the Presidium of the Women's Parliamentary Caucus, was asked to meet with the wife of the leader of the Democratic Party/*Partai Demokrat* to explain the importance of the law because, at that time, this party still refused to support the Bill. These dialogues sought to understand the different perspectives held among the lawmakers. As Willy Aditya states, "Politics is a space with various perspectives." Indonesian MPs also have the socio-cultural challenge of an embedded patriarchy. Our analysis of these dialogues uncovers that these different perspectives on the law were not based on religion, but rather on patriarchy. That is, MPs were less concerned with the threat to Islam than to an entrenched gender order that structures relations between men and women in Indonesian society. The dialogues also uncovered a public assumption that the Bill could lead to the normalization of "free sex" and LGBT identities, or homosexuality. Proponents of the Bill interacted with over 100 stakeholders to dispel these fears.

A final critical act was evident in arriving at compromise language, and, in particular, deleting terminology that proved too difficult for opponents to accept. As Willy Aditya explained, "Like it or not, the words 'sexual consent' are deleted. This is a crucial point where everyone needs to have a big heart."

According to Azriana Manalu, the Sexual Violence Crime Law only contains about 50% of the original draft that the *Komnas Perempuan* proposed. Hence, the definition of sexual violence crime, for instance, is rather vague: "Sexual Violence Crime is every action that fulfils crime criteria as regulated in this law and other sexual violence crimes as regulated by this law as long as determined in this law" (DPR, 2022a). Manalu continues by

saying that negotiation is really important, and ideally at least 70% or 80% could be accommodated. "But if it is impossible then we need to make compromises. The question then [is] do we want to get nothing, or [do] we want to get a little but still can do something with that little result," she said.

Of course, not all lawmakers remained in favor of the law's passage. In our interview on 25 December 2023, Kurniasih Mufidayati (representative of PKS in the Working Committee) said that PKS disagreed with the passing of the law because PKS seeks to broaden the scope of the law:

> Protection of women is not only a matter of violence. What about a man and a woman having a sexual relationship with consent that causes pregnancy of the woman? [And] he then [does] not want to be responsible for the woman and the child? The Sexual [Violence] Crime Law does not cover this matter. Whereas the woman becomes the victim even though there was no sexual violence.

Lawmakers representing Golkar, PKS, Gerindra, and PAN proposed the Family Resilience Bill on 7 February 2020, which was then included in the 2020 Prolegnas. The Bill aims to mitigate child marriage, "free sex," and drug abuse by strengthening the family as the core social system. However, five out of nine factions opposed the Bill and the legislative process ceased. Critics suggest this was a direct response toward the Bill (now Law) on Sexual Crimes, and the state intervenes too much in regulating the private and spiritual spheres of people's lives ("RUU Ketahanan Keluarga," 2020; Sari, 2020; Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023). (An analysis of the parliamentary debate is presented in the Supplementary File).

6. Conclusion

The experience in passing the Sexual Violence Crime Law provides key takeaways regarding GSP practices in a Global South setting. First, the Indonesian parliament is still far from achieving all four dimensions of GSPs, including the fourth dimension that has been the focus of this article. The long process involved in legislating is prime evidence for this claim. However, there are male and female lawmakers who demonstrated strong gender sensitivity through their critical acts (Childs & Krook, 2008) and have been very influential in ensuring the passing of the Sexual Crime Bill.

Second, there is a need to do more research on the motivations underlying lawmakers' resistance towards gender equality reforms. Our analysis uncovered that opposing camps are not motivated by threats to Islam itself. Rather, rejection of this bill was shaped by patriarchal assumptions that men would be punished for catcalling and similar activities. In other words, opponents are worried that the enforcement of this new law will change longstanding, but discriminatory, attitudes and perceptions toward women.

Lastly, in a parliament that has not yet become gender-sensitive, innovative strategies are critically required. There needs to be consistent persuasion toward lawmakers and party leaders on the benefits of advocating for women's interests through both their legislation and daily practices. As evidenced in our findings, the Law is a product of compromise to close the gap between those who continue to hold patriarchal values and those who demand reform. Thus, civil society organizations, religious groups, and the media need to maintain their political pressure on the DPR to achieve a GSP.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Gender, Intraparty Competition, and the Substantive Focus of Parliamentary Questions in South Africa

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Abstract

Extant research suggests that women ask more parliamentary questions (PQs) on soft policy domains while their male peers focus on hard domains, which are arguably more relevant. This study contributes to this body of research by examining how electoral incentives shape intraparty politics, and specifically the substantive focus of PQs. It argues that women's focus on soft policy domains is not constant, with variations found in situations where intraparty competition is high. Female MPs will have fewer incentives to focus on soft policy domains if they are electorally vulnerable and as elections draw closer. The mechanism is clear: Women face strong bias in parliament, which means they need to work harder to stand on an equal footing with their male counterparts. As a result, rather than shying away from competition, they will try to maximize their career prospects by shifting their attention to (hard) policy domains that are considered more important to both parties and voters. These claims are tested in the case of South Africa, drawing upon a novel dataset of PQs from 2006 to 2023. South Africa is an interesting case study as it is one of the most feminized parliaments in Africa and has strong electoral incentives for intraparty competition. The findings confirm most theoretical expectations and clarify the electoral and gender-related predispositions that drive the substantive focus of questions.

Keywords

election proximity; gender; parliamentary questions; South Africa; vulnerability

1. Introduction

Parliamentary questions (PQs) are important tools for MPs as they allow them to examine the actions of the executive and communicate policy positions. PQs can also be exploited by MPs for electoral purposes, be it to win nomination (e.g., by making themselves more visible to the party) or to maximize votes (e.g., by focusing on key policy issues of relevance to voters). Indeed, they are so highly coveted by the majority of MPs that there is considerable intraparty competition for question time. The gender of the MP also intervenes in this complex process and is likely to play a role in the substantive focus of PQs.

Past research has shown that women deliver fewer speeches (Bäck & Debus, 2019; Frantzeskakis et al., 2021; Sanches & Dias, 2021), and the questions they raise tend to focus more on soft rather than hard policy domains (Bird, 2005; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b). This study contributes to this debate by examining how electoral incentives shape intraparty politics, and specifically the substantive focus of PQs. We argue that female MPs' focus on soft policy domains varies in situations where intraparty competition is high. Specifically, female MPs will have fewer incentives to focus on soft issues if they are electorally vulnerable and as elections draw closer. The mechanism is clear: Women face strong bias in parliament, which means they need to work harder to be considered on an equal footing with their male counterparts (Bauer, 2020). As a result, rather than shying away from competition, they will try to maximize their career prospects by shifting their attention to (hard) policy domains that are considered more important to both parties and voters.

These claims are tested in the case of South Africa, drawing upon a novel dataset of PQs from 2006 to 2023. South Africa is an interesting case study as it is a dominant party system and one of the most feminized parliaments in Africa with strong electoral incentives for intraparty competition. The country uses a closed-list proportional representation system (CLPR) in national elections and parties control nominations tightly by assigning the top positions in the list to the best-performing and most loyal MPs (Barkan, 2009; Lieberman et al., 2021). This system encourages links with parties rather than with constituents and fosters intraparty competition for the positions in the list that are most likely to ensure election. This affects legislative behavior, i.e., the substantive focus on policy domains, as female MPs will have stronger incentives to go beyond traditional "women-specific issues" and show expertise on other issues to advance their careers.

The findings confirm our expectations and clarify the electoral predispositions that drive the substantive focus of questions in the Parliament of South Africa. The mechanism we hypothesized works well in the case of electoral vulnerability: Female MPs, who occupied an unsafe seat on the candidate list when elected, prioritize hard over soft policy domains. However, the effects of the electoral cycle are not straightforward. While women tend to ask fewer questions on soft policy domains as elections approach, they do not seem to submit more questions on hard policy domains, which remain a male stronghold. The study makes a significant contribution to the literature on legislative behavior by highlighting the electoral conditions under which MPs are more likely to switch the focus of their attention and it contributes to the feminist institutionalism literature by providing further evidence of clear gendered outcomes within parliaments. It also adds nuance to research on South Africa, which charts the decay of the substantive representation of women's issues in parliament due to deteriorating debate conditions, increased party discipline, and professionalization in parliament (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We start by introducing the theory and hypotheses before presenting the case of South Africa in Section 3. The following section outlines the methodology implemented. The empirical section discusses the results of the statistical analysis, and the conclusion sets out the implications of the study's key findings.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. The Strategic Use of PQs

MPs are instrumental in pursuing the various benefits provided by legislative institutions to advance electoral, office, and policy goals (Strøm, 1997). While these goals often overlap, electoral goals are usually seen as more important given that securing re-selection and re-election is the starting point for any further ambition (Strøm, 1997). Although MPs' capacity to address competing goals is likely to affect their legislative behavior (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016), the institutional context creates further constraints (Strøm, 1997). The institutional setting of interest to us here, namely CLPR systems, is characterized by centralized nomination procedures and strong party control over candidate selection; as a result, MPs feel a greater need to toe the party line to win a safe seat on the list that would secure their re-election (Strøm, 1997). This makes intraparty competition crucial; MPs need to outperform their co-partisans and please their selectors in order to achieve other goals.

PQs are one of the tools at MPs' disposal. These are typically utilized to scrutinize the government, gather information from the executive, and represent electoral interests (Bailer, 2011). They also help advance important individual goals, providing MPs with an opportunity to highlight their priorities, preferences, and expertise. Indeed, PQs "say a lot about individual behavior since they are less controlled (institutionally and politically) than most other forms of activity within the legislature" (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011, p. 398), such as roll-call votes, though this may vary depending on specific institutional settings. PQs also have the potential to enhance an MP's reputation and signal strategic electoral intentions to party selectors, often serving career-oriented purposes (Bailer, 2011, p. 312). Lastly, MPs' perceptions of their party leader's influence in the re-nomination process impact the content of the questions they table in parliament (Ciftci & Yildirim, 2019).

2.2. The Substantive Focus of PQs: The Role of Gender

Gender bias molds the political careers of female politicians in diverse ways, including their work within the parliament (Erikson & Verge, 2022, p. 4). Political institutions are not gender-neutral. In fact, the institutional "rules of the game" were established exclusively by men due to the historical male dominance within politics (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 27). Therefore, it is not only national parliaments but also political parties that are marked by conventional, and often implicit, gender norms that tend to disadvantage women (Kenny & Verge, 2016, p. 356) and produce gendered outcomes. In addition to formal norms, gendered workplaces such as parliaments are significantly shaped by informal rules, including practices related to behavior within the chamber, norms dictating political leadership roles, and standards associated with political competence (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 21). And even seemingly neutral rules can have "gendered effects" (Lowndes, 2020).

One of these gendered effects is that women in many parliaments around the world tend to participate less frequently in debates and deliver shorter speeches than their male counterparts (Bäck & Debus, 2019; De Vet

& Devroe, 2023b); this is the case in African parliaments (Frantzeskakis et al., 2021; Sanches & Dias, 2021). It has also been shown that female and male MPs tend to center on different topics. While female MPs focus more on the so-called "soft" policy domains—such as social affairs, health, and education—male MPs focus more on "hard" policy domains, such as economics and defense, both in European democracies (Bäck & Debus, 2019; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b) and Africa (Wahman et al., 2021).

With regards to PQs, the few existing studies have corroborated the tendency for female and male MPs to focus on different topics. De Vet and Devroe (2023a) show that Belgian female MPs are more likely to focus on issues that are salient to their party than on conflictual matters between coalition partners. In the British context, Bird (2005) finds that female MPs were more likely than their male peers to refer to "women" and "gender" in PQs, whereas male MPs were more inclined to refer to "men." More directly related to the topic of our article, De Vet and Devroe (2023b), again with reference to Belgium, demonstrate that gendered patterns in the substantive focus of PQs are more pronounced when party control is stronger. Whereas male MPs are generally more active than women on hard policy domains, female MPs only address soft policy domains more than men in their PQs during more party-controlled plenary sessions (De Vet & Devroe, 2023b, p. 266).

Studies about South Africa indicate that the increased presence of women in parliament was instrumental in advancing women's rights and gender equality laws (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). Female MPs "owned women issues" particularly in the first legislatures, but with time they faced harsher party control and had fewer opportunities to advance this agenda (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). While there is no evidence of how this affected question asking, there is evidence of gender bias in issue specialization. Hence, our baseline hypothesis:

> H1 (*baseline* hypothesis): There is a gender bias in the policy domains of PQs in which women tend to pose more PQs on soft policy domains and fewer PQs on hard policy domains compared to male MPs.

2.3. Intraparty Competition: The Effects of Vulnerability and Electoral Proximity

MPs adapt their parliamentary activities to specific contexts and institutions. In situations where intraparty competition is higher, such as under CLPR, MPs will strive even harder to secure their (re)selection for a safe place in the list. While there is a general belief that women tend to "shy away from competition and men embrace it" (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2016, p. 1067), this has not been confirmed by existing studies on PQs (De Vet & Devroe, 2023b), rendering the debate inconclusive. Women's competitive behavior may come as a response to prevailing gender norms. As in most other countries, women in the US often possess higher qualifications but must exert greater effort to achieve equal standing to that of their male peers (Bauer, 2020). In fact, patterns of gender segregation can be observed in various forms within every parliament. This is particularly evident if we consider the MPs' areas of specialization. The norms of masculinity entrenched within political institutions often devalue anything perceived as feminine while valorizing what is seen as masculine (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 28). Consequently, topics considered "soft" or associated with "women's issues" are typically regarded as less relevant than "hard" issues.

We therefore expect that women in competitive contexts will strive to distance themselves from policy domains perceived as more feminine and less relevant. They will likely have stronger incentives to demonstrate their commitment to harder, and thus more prestigious, policy domains. This is an attempt to

raise their profile to the party leadership, who also act as gatekeepers in the candidate selection process. The following hypotheses focus on two specific situations where intraparty competition is likely to be high, thereby prompting strategic behavior among MPs: electoral vulnerability and proximity to elections.

When MPs did not hold a safe seat in the candidate list for the previous election and hence perceive themselves as electorally vulnerable, they are especially inclined to demonstrate activity and allocate a greater proportion of resources to the goal of securing re-election (André et al., 2015; Strøm, 1997). Studies have shown that electoral vulnerability shapes legislative behavior in diverse electoral systems. Firstly, it increases the amount of work done by MPs (Bowler, 2010; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b). Secondly, it shapes their representational focus. For instance, more vulnerable MPs tend to adopt a more constituency-focused behavior (André et al., 2015; Kartalis, 2023); and this applies to several African countries, including South Africa (Sanches & Kartalis, 2024; Wegmann & Evequoz, 2019). Women are often found in vulnerable positions due to disadvantaging gender norms; however, existing research neglects how this may affect their legislative behavior and specifically question asking. One exception is the work of Höhmann (2020), which demonstrates that German female MPs act more strongly on behalf of women-specific interests if their re-election is secured, suggesting that they only prioritize this kind of issues if they do not compromise their individual re-election prospects. Building on these studies, we posit that vulnerable female MPs ask fewer "soft" PQs. Therefore, the second hypothesis is that:

> H2 (*vulnerability* hypothesis): Occupying a vulnerable position decreases the probability of women asking PQs on a soft policy domain and increases the probability of women asking PQs on a hard policy domain.

Recent studies show clear evidence that MPs' priorities and behavior in parliament change during the electoral cycle (Berz & Kroeber, 2023; Fernandes et al., 2018; Poljak & Walter, 2023). Such variation is expected as MPs face a multitude of demands throughout the electoral cycle and they need to prioritize different aspects of their work to attain their goals (Berz & Kroeber, 2023). During the legislative term, MPs transition from the honeymoon phase to the work and campaign phases, each of which sets a different challenge (Berz & Kroeber, 2023). A study on Germany shows that "right after elections, MPs act as policy-seeking actors, most notably by promoting issues emphasized by their parties. As elections approach, MPs aim to attract votes by turning to portfolios prominent in the working of their main competing parties" (Berz & Kroeber, 2023, p. 2). A study on Portugal also captures changing strategies over the electoral cycle: Legislators tend to focus more on raising the party profile in parliament as elections draw closer by using the floor—and the questioning tool—to gather as much information as possible on the relevant issues of the campaign (Fernandes et al., 2018). Despite slightly different results, both studies suggest that MPs will be more concerned about public opinion as elections approach and will emphasize issues of greater relevance to their voters (Berz & Kroeber, 2023).

In terms of gender, there is a prevailing association between masculinity and political leadership, making it incongruent for female MPs to adopt leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). To get around this, female candidates strive to strike a delicate balance by emphasizing masculine qualities (considered essential for political leadership) while also exhibiting some feminine qualities (to avoid criticism for appearing incongruent with their gender; Bauer & Santia, 2022, p. 694); this phenomenon is known as the "double-bind" dilemma. As elections approach, and particularly during electoral campaigns, masculine qualities appear to gain greater significance for women, suggesting that they are aware that this brings them

advantages (Bauer, 2020). Focusing on three elections in the US, Bauer and Santia (2022, p. 701) discovered that female candidates on the campaign trail often adopted more masculine than feminine traits. Similarly, Poljak (2022) notes that whereas male MPs typically display more agentic behavior in parliament than their female counterparts, this distinction tends to diminish during electoral campaigns. Although the electoral cycle also affects male politicians, it seems to have a less marked impact on men as their agentic behavior and masculine traits tend to be consistent throughout the electoral process (Poljak, 2022).

Drawing parallels with policy domains, we expect that women will try to focus more on "hard" issues in the final part of the legislative term than they did earlier in the cycle in the hope that it will be seen positively by both voters (Holman et al., 2019) and selectors. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

> H3 (*election proximity* hypothesis): Proximity to the elections decreases the likelihood of women asking PQs on a soft policy domain and increases the likelihood of women asking PQs on a hard policy domain.

3. The South African Context

South Africa is a parliamentary democracy, and it has held regular free and fair elections every five years since 1994. The National Assembly is elected through a CLPR system in two tiers: 200 MPs are elected from national lists, and 200 are elected in nine multimember provinces. Parties may opt to construct only national or provincial lists or run in all of the 10 electoral races (one national and nine provinces). The president, usually the leader of the largest party, is elected by the members of the National Assembly.

The African National Congress (ANC) is the country's largest party and the only one with governing experience; this is despite rising levels of protest and the emergence of strong opposition parties since the 2000s—the Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters (Kotze & Bohler-Muller, 2019; Paret, 2018). As the dominant party, the ANC is also a major contributor to the feminization of parliament; following the sustained militant work of the ANC Women's League, it implemented voluntary party quotas in 1991 (Walsh, 2011). The party's successful electoral results since 1994 (winning at least 55% of potential seats) have led to a significant feminization of the parliament: up from 25% in the 1994 elections to almost parity (46%) in 2019 (IPU Parline, n.d.). Women have also occupied important positions in parliament (e.g., seven out of eight speakers since 1994 have been women) and within cabinets; indeed, the current cabinet has almost achieved gender parity (Media Hack Collective, 2019).

The entry of more women in parliament helped advance women's rights, resulting from the strong ties linking ANC's female MPs to civil society (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). However, since 1999, the growing tensions between the state and women in civil society have led to "women's issues" being less represented (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). On the other hand, the increasing professionalization of parliament from 1999 was accompanied by the entry of a new generation of better-prepared female MPs in parliament (Britton, 2005). This new generation needed "research support to actualize their professional goals and to excel in debates and committees" and "funding to help constituents meet their goals and to prove to the voters they were doing their jobs" (Britton, 2005, p. 150). Alongside this generational change, more restrictions were imposed in debates because although governing elites favored "privileged, professional women with career ambitions," "they disciplined independent and outspoken MPs,

undermining the openness of debate conditions" (Walsh, 2011, p. 211). These contextual features make South Africa an interesting case for understanding intraparty competition for PQs along gender lines.

According to the Rules of the National Assembly (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2016), PQs can only be addressed to members of the cabinet, the deputy president, and the president, and must relate to matters for which the respective cabinet member is officially responsible. The speaker reserves the right to amend a question or return it to the member who submitted it if it is not consistent with the rules (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2016, Chapter 10, Part 1). MPs may table three types of questions—Questions for Written Reply, Questions for Oral Reply, and Urgent Questions; however, there is a fair amount of party control as explained below.

As in other CLPR systems, intraparty competition is crucial in South Africa: MPs need to outperform their co-partisans to win the safest positions in the list and secure re-election. This is particularly important as candidate selection in all South African parties is highly centralized among national elites (Barkan, 2009; Lieberman et al., 2021). Studies have shown that parties, particularly the ANC, hand-pick female MPs that toe the party line to strengthen executive dominance in parliament (Walsh, 2011). There is also evidence that South African MPs behave differently depending on how safe their seat is (Sanches & Kartalis, 2024; Sanches et al., in press). The question is whether intraparty competition shapes how male and female MPs use the questioning tool.

CLPR systems are also known for encouraging greater party control over who gets access to the floor and the content of speeches because parties want to make sure that interventions and policy decisions follow the party line (Slapin & Proksch, 2021). This control is further enhanced in South Africa due to its hybrid parliamentary regime (most ministers are also MPs); cabinet survival requires party discipline and unity. Interviews conducted during fieldwork confirm that party leaders care about what is being communicated on the floor. Within the ANC, questions are clustered in themes and screened by chairpersons and whips to make sure they are congruent with the party line (ANC National Assembly deputy chief whip, interview, September 2023). The same happens within the Democratic Alliance where MPs' attendance is also monitored, whether they are asking questions or issuing a statement (Democratic Alliance deputy chief whip, interview, September 2023). In smaller parties, there is more coordination as there are fewer representatives to allocate to different tasks (e.g., Freedom Front Plus party leader, interview, September 2023). In this context of party control, our goal is to understand MPs' substantive focus on issues, and the conditions under which they change.

4. Methods and Data

4.1. Data

To test the hypotheses, this study makes use of an original dataset of PQs tabled in South Africa's National Assembly between 2006 and 2023. The PQs were extracted from the website of the South African parliament, where they are available in the form of official question paper documents (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, n.d.). Our dataset covers 16 years and four legislative terms of PQs, namely the 3rd (2006–2009), the 4th (2009–2014), the 5th (2014–2019), and the 6th (2019–ongoing at the time of writing this article) democratic parliaments. Data for the 6th democratic parliament are included up to 27/10/2023. At the time

of writing, data on the 1st and 2nd legislatures were not available. Overall, 35,016 questions were extracted from the question paper documents available after cleaning and removing duplicates.

4.2. Dependent Variable

To operationalize the policy focus of each question in the dataset, the article makes use of an automated classification pipeline. Leveraging OpenAI's API and its offering of Large Language Models (see more details on this in the Supplementary File, Note 1), each question is first automatically classified into the 21 Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) policy areas. Each policy area is then classified further into a policy domain ("hard PQs," "soft PQs," and "neutral PQs"), following the De Vet and Devroe (2023b) coding scheme (Supplementary File, Table A.1). We examined the accuracy of the initial-stage classification into policy areas vis-a-vis manual classification, which yielded an overall 95% accuracy (see more details on this in the Supplementary File, Note 2).

Additionally, to avoid single-issue coding, the selected Large Language Model is allowed to classify questions into multiple policy areas. A question fitting more than one policy area is further disaggregated to the equivalent number of policy areas, augmenting the final dataset to 42,995 questions. The unit of analysis is each unique combination of question and CAP policy area. For example, if a question has been assigned two CAP policy areas, then it is disaggregated into two data points in our dataset: one for each policy area assigned. As an example, the question "What are the full details of the reasons for the delay by the Health Professions Council of South Africa in publishing the list of foreign universities that are accredited and recognized by the Republic as tertiary institutions for professional medical training?" has been assigned two CAP policy areas: "Education" and "Health." In our dataset, there are two data points deriving from this single question, one for each assigned CAP policy area. See the Supplementary File, Table A.2, for more example sentences. Table 1 shows descriptive counts of the policy domain variable per legislature.

Table 1. Policy domain of PQs per legislature in South Africa.

Label	Variable	Policy Domain			Total
		Neutral	Soft	Hard	
	3rd Democratic Parliament	916 (51%)	323 (18%)	574 (32%)	1,813 (4%)
	4th Democratic Parliament	5,269 (45%)	2,195 (19%)	4,140 (36%)	11,604 (27%)
Legislature	5th Democratic Parliament	6,844 (45%)	2,641 (17%)	5,812 (38%)	15,297 (36%)
	6th Democratic Parliament	5,472 (38%)	3,538 (25%)	5,271 (37%)	14,281 (33%)
	Total	18,501 (43%)	8,697 (20%)	15,797 (37%)	42,995 (100%)

4.3. Independent Variables

The main independent variable is *gender* (1 = female; 0 = male) which is interacted with *electoral vulnerability* and *election proximity* to test H2 and H3, respectively. *Vulnerability* is measured by looking at the MPs' positions on the electoral list as a fraction of the total seats their party won in the previous election (following André et al., 2015). It ranges from 0.04 (zero) to 45; the higher the value, the more vulnerable the legislator is. *Election proximity* is measured as the number of days between the day the question was asked and the next election. The variable is coded so that a higher value means the question was asked closer to the upcoming election.

As for the control variables, the article includes: *minister* (1 = if the question is tabled by a member of the cabinet, and 0 = if not); *party seat share*, measured as the share of seats that the party of the MP asking the question holds in parliament; *government*, which distinguishes between government (1) and opposition parliamentary groups (0); *mandate* captures the duration of the MP's tenure in the current legislature at the time of asking the question measured in days; *seniority* is measured as the number of terms a legislator has served at the time of asking the question; *parliamentary party group leader* controls for whether the MP asking the question is a member of the parliamentary party group leadership; *female party group leader*, which is a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 if the chief whip of the parliamentary group is female and 0 if not. Finally, the article includes a measure of *gender equality* at the party level by utilizing the V-dem "v2pagender" variable that looks at the share of women in national-level leadership positions. Table A.3 of the Supplementary File presents basic descriptive statistics for all the variables used in the analyses.

The main empirical analysis employs a multinomial logit regression, contrasting two categories of the dependent variable—namely, hard and soft PQs—against the reference category of neutral PQs. The variables were rescaled and centered before running the models.

5. Results

In line with previous studies, our baseline hypothesis (H1) predicts a gender bias whereby women are more likely to ask PQs on soft policy domains than on hard domains compared to male MPs. Unsurprisingly, our descriptive data provides initial support to this hypothesis. Over the entire period under analysis (2006–2023), female MPs ask an average of 1.52 PQs on hard policy domains, whereas male MPs ask an average of 2.41 (see Figure 1). Conversely, female MPs ask an average of 4.08 soft PQs, compared to the 2.64 asked by their male peers. Male parliamentarians also ask more neutral PQs. Figure A.1 in the Supplementary File displays the average number of PQs per gender and policy domain.
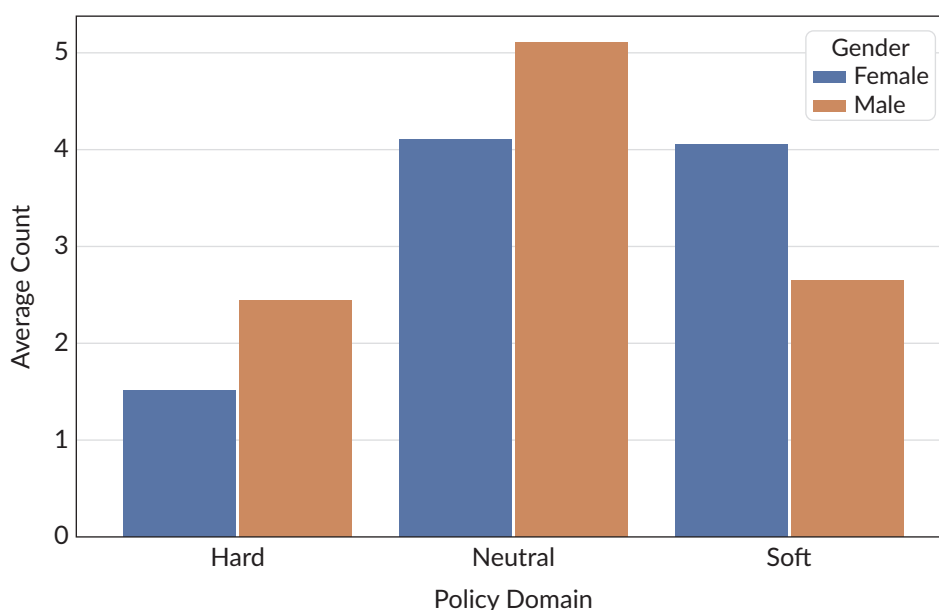

Figure 1. Average count of PQs per policy domain for female and male MPs.

Table 2 presents the results of the multinomial logit regression testing each hypothesis. Starting with the Baseline Model in which the control variables are constant, we find that South African female MPs have a significantly higher probability than men of asking soft PQs compared to neutral PQs—the reference category ($p = 0.724$); however, they have a significantly lower probability of asking hard PQs ($p = -0.288$). This outcome aligns South Africa with most research in the field (Bäck & Debus, 2019; De Vet & Devroe, 2023b; Wahman et al., 2021), and justifies exploring the next two hypotheses to understand whether the degree of gender bias varies depending on the MPs' electoral vulnerability and electoral proximity.

Table 2. Multinomial logit regression for the baseline, vulnerability, and election proximity hypotheses.

	Results					
	(1) Baseline Model		(2) Vulnerability Model		(3) Election Proximity Model	
	Soft	Hard	Soft	Hard	Soft	Hard
Gender: l=Female	0.724*** (0.029)	−0.288*** (0.025)	0.628*** (0.038)	−0.209*** (0.033)	0.724*** (0.029)	−0.288*** (0.025)
Vulnerability	−0.359*** (0.078)	−0.059 (0.063)	−0.359*** (0.079)	0.058 (0.069)	−0.373*** (0.078)	−0.070 (0.063)
Female parl group leader	−0.280* (0.116)	−0.229* (0.102)	−0.306** (0.116)	−0.205* (0.103)	−0.292* (0.116)	−0.241* (0.103)
Election proximity	−0.010 (0.015)	0.044*** (0.012)	−0.013 (0.015)	0.045*** (0.012)	−0.014 (0.015)	0.031* (0.013)
Government	0.400 (0.508)	−0.321 (0.450)	0.314 (0.509)	−0.236 (0.450)	0.350 (0.509)	−0.370 (0.450)
Seniority	0.025 (0.017)	0.110*** (0.013)	0.027 (0.017)	0.109*** (0.013)	0.026 (0.017)	0.111*** (0.013)
Pari party group leader	−0.431*** (0.105)	−0.173* (0.078)	−0.411*** (0.106)	−0.186* (0.078)	−0.438*** (0.106)	−0.179* (0.078)
Minister	−0.158 (0.212)	−0.231 (0.154)	−0.180 (0.212)	−0.219 (0.154)	−0.153 (0.213)	−0.227 (0.154)
MP mandate	0.030* (0.015)	0.125*** (0.012)	0.027[+] (0.015)	0.127*** (0.012)	0.028[+] (0.015)	0.123*** (0.012)
Party seat share	−0.725*** (0.120)	0.216* (0.096)	−0.746*** (0.120)	0.227* (0.096)	−0.723*** (0.120)	0.218* (0.096)
Gender equality	0.654*** (0.084)	−0.097 (0.072)	0.690*** (0.085)	−0.124[+] (0.072)	0.661*** (0.084)	−0.091 (0.072)
Gender*vulnerability			−0.610*** (0.150)	0.493*** (0.133)		
Gender*election proximity					−0.087** (0.028)	−0.078** (0.025)
Constant	−0.945*** (0.208)	−0.864*** (0.171)	−0.981*** (0.208)	−0.816*** (0.172)	−0.981*** (0.208)	−0.894*** (0.172)
N	42,995		42,995		42,995	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	79,837.770		79,793.100		79,827.590	

Notes: p < 0.1; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001; coefficients estimated with multinomial logit regression; a control variable for legislature fixed effects is included in the models but not displayed; see Table A.4 in the Supplementary File showing the Models with interactions, excluding control variables.

Our second hypothesis posited that women in vulnerable list positions would ask fewer PQs on soft policy domains and more PQs on hard policy domains. In other words, the gender bias is expected to be smaller among vulnerable MPs than among MPs with safe seats. The results shown in Table 2 (Vulnerability Model) confirm this hypothesis. In fact, the coefficients for the interaction effects for both soft and hard PQs (again having neutral PQs as the reference category) are significant, negative in the former case and positive in the latter.

These results are clearer when considering the predictive margins illustrated in Figure 2 (left side). Women are represented by the blue line and men by the red line. Recall that the vulnerability variable ranges from 0 to 45, with higher values corresponding to greater vulnerability. In the upper graph, which relates to the PQs on hard policy domains, it is clear that more vulnerable female MPs have a greater probability of asking questions on hard policy domains than female MPs who occupy safe seats. It is interesting to observe that, although the slope is steeper for women, the tendency for male MPs is quite the contrary: male MPs who are electorally vulnerable ask fewer hard PQs than those who are more secure. In fact, when vulnerability reaches its highest point, there is no gender bias at all. This contrasting tendency for women and men highlights the gendered nature of parliamentary activity (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Lovenduski, 2005).

We also confirm H2 when we examine the women's line in the bottom graph, which corresponds to soft PQs, as we observe the opposite result from what is described above for hard PQs. Specifically, the more vulnerable female MPs are, the fewer PQs they ask on soft policy domains. In this case, the slope for male MPs remains completely flat, indicating that vulnerability does not affect the number of soft PQs they ask. Concerning soft PQs, the gender bias does not completely disappear among vulnerable MPs, but it declines significantly when compared to MPs occupying safe seats. Taken together, the results we obtained for both soft and hard PQs are consistent with our theoretical expectations that, in contexts of high intraparty competition, women adopt a competitive behavior to highlight their credentials to the party. Thus, they tend to distance themselves from domains that disadvantage them and focus on more prestigious hard topics. Looking at this from another perspective, they only prioritize soft topics if it does not compromise their individual re-election prospects (consistent with Höhmann, 2020).

The case study literature adds further nuance to these findings, indicating that although women in the South African parliament have become more elitist, professionalized, and focused on advancing their careers, they are now less concerned with the substantive representation of women's issues (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). This does not mean that female MPs have alienated female constituents or soft issues in general, as H1 shows that gender bias is still there. However, these results reveal that female MPs adopt a more competitive behavior when they are in a more vulnerable position.

The results for the electoral cycle hypothesis are less straightforward. The expectation was that proximity to the elections would decrease the likelihood of women asking PQs related to a soft policy domain and increase the likelihood of their asking PQs related to a hard policy domain. Looking at Table 2 for the Election Proximity Model, we again observe significant results for both interaction terms (between gender and election proximity). However, not only are the coefficients much smaller than those observed in the Vulnerability Model, but the sign for hard PQs also goes in the opposite direction. Confirmation of the hypothesis would require the interaction term to have a positive sign; however, we observe a negative sign ($p = -0.078$). The coefficient
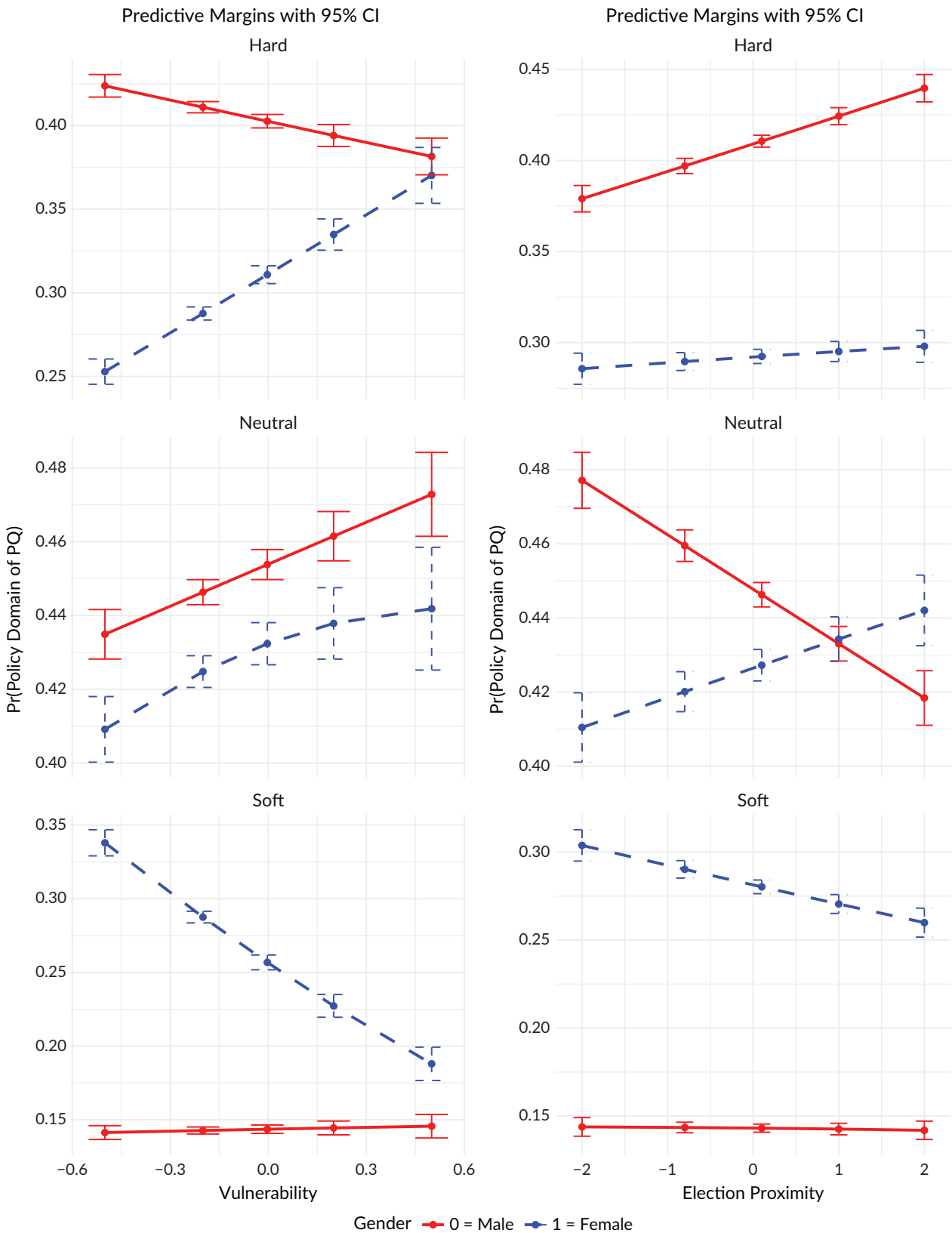
Figure 2. Predictive margins of posing soft, neutral, or hard PQs per gender according to vulnerability and election proximity.

for soft PQs follows the expected direction. These results are consistent with the graph on the right side of Figure 2. It is important to note that, overall, the slopes for the electoral cycle are much flatter compared to vulnerability, demonstrating that election proximity does not significantly shape the substantive focus of PQs along gender lines. Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy results.

First, we confirm the hypothesis for soft PQs. In fact, as elections approach, i.e., as we move towards the right side of the graph, female MPs tend to ask fewer soft PQs. Thus, once again we observe the same tendency for women to distance themselves from topics that do not benefit their career prospects. As observed in the case of vulnerability, the line for men is completely flat. Second, concerning hard PQs, the electoral cycle does not seem to produce an effect on women (flat blue line); this is in contrast to men who increase the average number of hard PQs as elections draw closer. This suggests that, at critical moments, men are more able to shine on the parliamentary floor with questions on topics that tend to be considered more relevant by voters (and party leaders). Considering the context of party constraints in the South African parliament (Sanches & Kartalis, 2024), including constraints on PQs, there is a strong possibility that female MPs are not given the opportunity to pose many hard PQs at such a crucial time in the electoral cycle.

Although our hypotheses focused exclusively on women, it is also interesting to reflect on some of the results we obtained for male MPs. On the one hand, the fact that the level of intraparty competition (operationalized both as vulnerability and election proximity) does not affect male MPs' propensity to ask soft PQs demonstrates the limited relevance that issues such as social affairs, health, and education tend to have for them. On the other hand, both vulnerability and the electoral cycle affect male MPs' decision to ask hard policy PQs. However, it is particularly interesting to note that these two effects move in opposite directions: While the number of hard PQs decreases as vulnerability increases, it increases as elections approach. This suggests that different mechanisms are at play. Although further research is necessary to confirm this, our interpretation of the result for vulnerability is that male MPs in safe positions, who are typically more senior in parliament, may prioritize the prestigious topics for themselves so that it is more challenging for newcomers to address them. Regarding the electoral cycle, there seems to be a similar mechanism to the one we hypothesized for women: At critical moments, whenever possible, male MPs tend to focus more on issues deemed important by both voters and party leaders.

Lastly, a natural expectation is that gender interacts with the electoral cycle and with vulnerability since proximity to elections is likely to have a greater effect on more vulnerable MPs (Fernandes et al., 2018). However, the results for the three-way interaction are not significant (Supplementary File, Table A.5).

6. Conclusion

PQs are one of the parliamentary procedures used strategically by MPs to enhance their re-selection and re-election prospects (Bailer, 2011; Ciftci & Yildirim, 2019). We argue that the way in which MPs use this tool, i.e., the issues they focus on, is likely to vary along gender lines, and in contexts of high intraparty competition. To test these claims, we proceed in two steps. The first analysis tested the widely supported finding that female MPs table more PQs on soft rather than hard policy domains. This was clearly supported by our data, indicating that there is gender bias in the substantive focus of PQs in the parliament of South Africa, despite the high level of feminization and key advances in women's rights (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011). These findings are similar to those observed in most parliaments in more consolidated democracies.

The second step involved a set of analyses to determine whether this gender bias varied depending on either the degree of intraparty competition induced by vulnerability or the stage in the electoral cycle. The theoretical expectations were that female MPs would try to increase their chances of being re-elected if they were in a vulnerable position in the electoral lists and/or as the election approaches by tabling PQs that focus more on topics considered more relevant and prestigious and less on those that do not benefit their prospects of re-selection. Women's more competitive behavior is expected to result from embedded gender norms, which require them to adopt roles and topics that go beyond those traditionally associated with them. In short, the necessity to display activity—vis-a-vis male peers—prompts a more competitive behavior.

The analyses conducted largely confirm our hypotheses. In particular, our data on vulnerability reveal a clear tendency for female MPs who do not hold a safe seat to prioritize hard policy domains and avoid soft ones. This not only underscores female MPs' capacity for hard work (Kantola & Agustín, 2019) but also their resilience and determination to overcome a parliamentary environment that tends to penalize women by distancing themselves from what is perceived as feminine (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Lovenduski, 2005). These results nuance the common perception that women tend to shy away from competition (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2016) and findings suggesting that intraparty competition has a limited effect on the substantive focus of PQs (De Vet & Devroe, 2023b).

Conversely, the results regarding the electoral cycle are not as straightforward. Although there remains a tendency for women to focus slightly less on soft issues as elections approach, no discernible effect is observed for hard topics. In other words, they do not seem to be winning more question time on hard policy domains. Our interpretation of the weak results for the electoral cycle, vis-a-vis that of vulnerability, is that party control over PQs in South Africa is even stronger in the run-up to elections as it coincides with heightened voter attention on politics. Thus, party leaders may give precedence to male MPs to address the more relevant issues on the parliamentary floor; this is certainly apparent in Africa where the economy, which is clearly a hard policy domain, is of great relevance to voters (Wahman et al., 2021). The same is seen in South Africa, where citizens consistently rate hard issues—such as unemployment, crime and security, poverty, and management of the economy—as the most important issues to be addressed by the government (see Table A.6 in the Supplementary File).

Overall, our findings have two main implications. While it is widely acknowledged that male MPs tend to avoid soft policy domains, our research underscores the perception that these policy domains are considered less important by demonstrating for the first time (but see also Höhmann, 2020) that female MPs also steer clear of these topics when seeking to advance in politics. This highlights the fact that the gender difference in policy focus is in fact a form of gender inequality, with unequal career implications for female and male MPs. Second, the clear demonstration that most MPs (both male and female) see soft policy domains as less prestigious and advantageous draws attention to the danger of a decline in political responsiveness to areas such as education or health, ultimately impacting societal well-being and equity. For example, the discontinuation of the advances in women's rights observed in South Africa has affected the quality of political representation (Albertyn, 2003; Britton, 2005; Walsh, 2011).

The study makes a significant contribution to the literature on legislative behavior by highlighting the electoral conditions under which MPs are more likely to switch their focus of attention. Additionally, it contributes to the feminist institutionalism literature by providing further evidence of clear gendered

outcomes within parliaments. We hope this article will encourage further research exploring different dimensions of intraparty competition that, concerning gender, might affect the allocation of policy domains in parliament. Future studies should also consider replicating this analysis in parliaments with different institutional settings to confirm the validity of the results across varied contexts. Finally, further qualitative research (involving interviews) would help clarify whether how female and male MPs pose questions, in general, is shaped by non-electoral motives—e.g., preferences and intrinsic views.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used in this article will be made available upon request (ersanches@ics.ulisboa.pt).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Adverse Contagion? Populist Radical Right Parties and Norms on Gender Balance in Political Institutions

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Abstract

How do male-dominated populist radical right (PRR) parties relate to and influence norms around women's political inclusion and leadership in mainstream political parties? While research has focused on describing the male dominance of PRR parties or its influence on mainstream political parties' policies, particularly immigration, we know less about how PRR parties relate to norms on women's inclusion or gender-balanced representation in mainstream parties. In a theory-building effort, we posit that PRR parties may seek to (a) adapt to mainstream parties' norms and include more women in leading positions (positive contagion) or (b) negatively affect or even challenge norms around women's inclusion in mainstream parties (adverse contagion). Seeking to theorize this relationship further, we explore leadership selection in the Swedish Parliament, where gender balance constitutes a strong norm. Yet, following the 2022 elections, the proportion of women parliamentary leaders dipped below 30% for the first time in decades. At the same time, the Sweden Democrats, a male-dominated PRR party, emerged as the second-largest party in Parliament. Drawing on interviews with nomination committees, party documents, and data on leadership, we empirically investigate continuity and change in committee leadership appointments in the Swedish Parliament and the role of the radical right in this process. We do not find signs of adverse contagion in the short run: as of 2023, norms promoting gender balance appear to remain robust and enjoy widespread support among mainstream parties. Yet, neither do we find signs of positive contagion where the radical right adapts to mainstream norms around gender balance.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, women's access to top political leadership positions in government, parties, and parliaments has increased in many countries around the globe. Research shows that informal gender norms, rather than quotas or formal regulations, have played an important role in this development. In countries and political parties where norms around women's inclusion as a representational criteria and gender balance have emerged, women are also more likely to hold political leadership positions (Annesley et al., 2019). Sweden is often mentioned as a role model, with a long history of a high share of women in leading positions and established norms of gender balance in politics. Yet, after the election of 2022, the tradition of gender-balanced leadership in parliament was broken. After the appointment procedures in the fall of 2022, only four of the sixteen parliamentary committees were led by a woman. Among the eight chair positions held by the governing parties, only one was a woman. Counting both chairs and vice chairs, the governing parties appointed one woman and fifteen men. Taken together, women's share of the committee presidium posts dropped to less than 30%—a record low. At the same time, the Sweden Democrats—a populist radical right (PRR) party—became the second-largest party and took part in the governing majority for the first time. What role has this party played in the dramatic decrease in women's representation in leading positions?

In a theory-building effort, this article explores challenges to norms around gender-balanced political leadership. In particular, we focus on the challenges PRR parties pose to such norms. These parties are often heavily male-dominated and, as such, openly challenge norms around gender balance in politics and political leadership. Emerging research has explored radical right parties' influence on mainstream parties' attitudes and policies on immigration, showing how established parties react to radical right success by becoming more anti-immigrant and culturally protectionist (see, e.g., Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). However, we know less about if and how these parties adapt to and affect mainstream parties' norms around gender equality in political representation. We contribute to filling this gap by asking: How do PRR parties relate to contexts where mainstream parties have strong norms around gender balance in political leadership? And to what extent do PRR parties' views and male domination negatively affect mainstream political parties' norms and selection criteria? Seeking to theorize this relationship further, we develop hypothetical scenarios of how PRR parties adapt to or affect norms on women's inclusion in mainstream parties. Drawing on the Swedish case, we empirically explore these scenarios to increase our understanding of why so few women were appointed committee leaders following the 2022 parliamentary election. In particular, we examine to what extent there are signs of what we label an adverse contagion effect, where male dominance and masculinity norms in the PRR party spill over to mainstream parties.

In the empirical study, we draw on interviews with Swedish party group leaders, nomination committee representatives, and leaders of women's sections in the political parties, as well as data on leadership appointments. We find no evidence that the low share of women committee leaders can be explained by adverse contagion—norms around gender balance in leadership appear strong and uncontested across all mainstream parties. Instead, the mainstream parties point to disrupted appointment procedures and coincidence for explaining the low share of appointed women leaders to these positions. These findings align with a continued commitment to gender balance in other leading party roles. Time will tell, however, to what extent the appointment of men in the governing majority is an initial sign of norm erosion and adverse contagion of male dominance.

2. Previous Research on Parties and Gender Balance in Political Leadership

Political parties are responsible for appointments to many leading political positions—including party leaders, cabinet ministers, and parliamentary leaders—and parties vary in how much they value and prioritize gender equality. In contrast to women's representation in parliaments, which in many countries has increased due to gender quotas (Hughes et al., 2019), there are seldom such regulations for leadership positions. Instead, women's representation in political leadership often hinges on informal rules, including norms and practices related to appointment and qualification criteria (Annesley et al., 2019). While norms of gender-balanced representation in some contexts are a feature of broader political arenas such as parliaments (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2021) or cabinets (Annesley et al., 2019), there is often significant variation across political parties. In addition, the lack of formal regulations gives parties leeway to deviate from such norms even in gender-balanced contexts.

To understand the variation in women's representation in leadership positions and norms around gender-balanced leadership appointments, political parties are thus crucial. While early research highlighted a connection between a leftist ideology and a higher number of women in office (Caul, 1999), more recent research has found that European social democratic parties are no more likely to select women as party leaders than other parties (O'Brien, 2015). Communist parties are, in fact, significantly less likely than other party families to break with male dominance at the highest level of the political party (O'Brien, 2015). Instead, parties belonging to the "new left"—green and radical left-wing parties—prioritize gender equality in political representation, have a higher proportion of women MPs in parliament, and are more likely to select women as party leaders in comparison to other party families in Europe (Keith & Verge, 2018; O'Brien, 2015; Weeks et al., 2023). In contrast, PRR parties are, in several studies, pointed out as most reluctant to include women in leading positions. These parties have traditionally been male-dominated, led by male leaders, and many such parties have been associated with a distinctly masculine image (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Weeks et al., 2023). While some studies indicate that PRR parties negatively influence women's representation on an aggregate level, knowledge is limited about whether and how radical right parties' male dominance affects women's representation in mainstream parties. At the same time, while women are still poorly represented in PRR parties, the share of women MPs in European PRR parties has significantly increased in recent decades (Weeks et al., 2023). Moreover, women PRR leaders, such as Marine Le Pen in France, Siv Jensen in Norway, and Ayelet Shaked in Israel, are increasingly visible figures in radical right politics (Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Chueri & Damerow, 2023).

3. Theorizing the Role and Impact of Radical Right Parties on Gender-Balanced Leadership

We posit that the entrance and growing strength of a male-dominated radical right party can be considered a critical moment that potentially challenges gender equality norms in political leadership in mainstream parties. In a first attempt to advance theory around the relationship between PRR parties and norms around women's political inclusion in mainstream parties, we theorize three possible scenarios on how a radical right party might affect or be affected by mainstream parties' norms on gender equality in representation.

In the first possible scenario, PRR parties adapt to mainstream political parties' norms around gender balance in politics and seek to increase their share of women in the legislature and leading positions. Here, contagion theory provides a helpful starting point. It suggests that parties feel pressured to include more women if

other parties have started doing so, thus causing a positive contagion effect. Commonly, traditional mainstream political parties have been induced to increase their share of women in response to women's inclusion by a smaller leftist party (Matland & Studlar, 1996). Following this reasoning, PRR parties competing with mainstream parties with strong norms around women's inclusion and gender balance should adapt and include more women on their ballots and in leading positions to attract voters. While strategic or more genuine concerns might drive changes in how PRR parties approach women's inclusion, research on radical right feminization has primarily focused on such parties' strategic incentives for including more women. Indeed, scholars have found that many PRR parties soften their radical discourse over time and seek to appear as a more standard competitor in the party system. Erzeel and Rashkova (2017) argue that including more women in their ranks to appear less male-dominated can be understood as such a standardization strategy. By increasing the visibility of women within their parties, these parties can appear more mainstream and acceptable to the general public without having to change their core programmatic standpoints (Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Chueri & Damerow, 2023). Seeking to understand the increased inclusion of women in radical right parties in recent decades, Weeks et al. (2023) develop a theory of strategic descriptive representation, arguing that PRR parties strategically increase their share of women MPs when they are losing votes and when women are underrepresented among their voters. In contrast, successful PRR parties with a predominantly male vote base should continue to strategically exclude women. Based on data on women's representation in 22 European PRR parties across three decades, they find support for this strategic story (Weeks et al., 2023). We add to this by emphasizing the importance of context and, particularly, the level of women's inclusion in mainstream parties. If women's political inclusion constitutes a strong norm in mainstream parties, we argue that the PRR parties should be more likely to adapt and strategically promote women. In contrast, in cases where mainstream parties are also male-dominated, including more women is a less probable standardization strategy.

In a second scenario, we posit that the entrance and emerging strength of a PRR party negatively affect the representation of women in mainstream political parties. While contagion theory is commonly used to explain increases in the overall share of women in politics, less attention has been paid to potentially adverse contagion effects: how norms around gender balance in mainstream political parties may be challenged and erode as a consequence of successful and heavily male-dominated radical right parties. Mainstream political parties on both the left and the right have been found to shift their policy positions towards more anti-immigration and cultural protectionism in response to successful PRR contenders (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). Yet, little is known about mainstream parties' responses concerning other issues. A possible explanation for such adverse contagion effects on women's representation is that mainstream parties come to perceive male domination and a masculine image as a successful electoral strategy if the goal is to regain voters from the radical right—i.e., they strategically masculinize. Other potential mechanisms behind adverse contagion are that norm perceptions change within mainstream parties or that the power balance within mainstream parties is affected. In a new political landscape where the radical right and their conservative ideals gain ground, opponents to gender-equal representation within mainstream parties may become empowered. Especially in mainstream right-wing parties, which have been more reluctant to accept gender equality in representation, opponents to gender balance likely remain. In such situations, ideals and criteria other than gender balance may start to regain influence in appointment procedures.

Finally, it is certainly also possible that the PRR party is not affected by and does not affect mainstream political parties' norms on gender equal representation. In this third scenario, the PRR party continues to select few

women to their electoral lists and appoint few women to leading positions. In contrast, mainstream parties continue to elect and appoint as many women as before. In this case, mainstream parties' norms around gender balance in politics are not affected.

How a PRR party is affected by and affects norms around women's inclusion and gender equality in mainstream parties is an important and understudied question. We posit that the tentative scenarios outlined above should be further developed and explored in different contexts. In this article, we take advantage of a critical case on the micro level—committee leadership appointments in the Swedish Parliament—to explore the role of a successful PRR party in a context with historically strong gender-balanced norms. This empirical analysis lays the ground for further theory-building on the relationship between PRR parties and gender equality norms.

4. Gender-Balanced Leadership in the Swedish Parliament

Political gender equality has been a stated goal in Swedish politics since the 1990s. A principle of gender-equal representation has become established within political parties (Freidenvall, 2021), reflected in the high share of women in parliament and parity governments in the past three decades. Moreover, previous research finds that the Swedish parliament has featured "gender sensitivity" in many aspects (Wängnerud, 2015) and that a shared "legislative gender equality norm" has emerged in the mainstream parties (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2021). Yet, the Swedish advancements in political gender equality rely on informal practices, norms, and agreements. Neither the political parties nor the parliament have adopted formal gender quotas, and consequently, there are no formal sanctions tied to non-compliance (Freidenvall, 2021). According to Erikson and Freidenvall (2024, p. 30), it is "remarkable that no hard measures to secure a gender equal representation in parliament's committees, or leading positions, have been adopted during this period [1994–2022]." Against this backdrop, the significant decrease in women's share of the presidium posts of the standing committees after the 2022 elections calls into question the strength of Sweden's established and informally institutionalized political gender equality. While women's share in the presidium posts, on average, has followed women's representation in parliament since the 1990s, that is no longer the case. Currently, women hold less than 30% of these positions. The governing majority has only appointed one woman in their sixteen committee chair and vice chair posts (see Figure 1).

To understand the current situation, some background information on the Swedish parliament and the political landscape is needed. The Swedish parliament is a unicameral parliament consisting of 349 members elected through a system of proportional representation, with eight political parties being represented: the Left Party, the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Center Party, the Liberals, the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats. Throughout the 20th century, parties collaborated along a left-right divide, with the Social Democrats and the Moderates (conservative/liberal) as the main adversaries, shifting in governing power. In 2010, the PRR party, the Sweden Democrats, entered parliament for the first time. Since then, the party has steadily increased its seat share to 20.5 % in 2022, currently being the second-largest party after the Social Democrats. Despite the Sweden Democrats' pivotal position between the right and left bloc in parliament, the party has been treated as pariah by the mainstream political parties who have refused to collaborate or negotiate with the party (Backlund, 2020; Leander, 2022). Yet, after the 2018 elections, the mainstream right opened up to abandoning its previous cordon sanitaire towards the Sweden Democrats, and after the 2022 elections, a minority right-wing government was formed. This government is constituted by the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals, and rules with support from the Sweden Democrats—

Figure 1. The proportion of women in parliamentary committee leadership positions (1988–2023). Note: The proportion of women leaders is calculated as the proportion of days when women have held a leading position.

a collaboration regulated in a comprehensive agreement (the so-called Tidö Agreement) that gives the PRR party ample influence over government policy and representation in the Prime Minister's Office. Since Sweden is a highly party-centered parliamentary democracy, the Sweden Democrats' shifting status from pariah to collaboration partner also influences the work in parliament to a large extent, including the appointments to leading positions.

Taken together, the strong norms around gender-equal representation in mainstream parties, the electoral success of the PRR, and the current decrease of women in leading positions produce somewhat conflicting expectations with regard to the three scenarios outlined above. On the one hand, the strong and longstanding norms around gender parity in the Swedish mainstream parties should entail strong incentives for the radical right party to adapt and feminize if it wants to appear as a standard competitor without having to change its radical standpoints on immigration. On that basis, we would expect the scenario of positive contagion to be a likely outcome in which the Sweden Democrats involve more women in leadership over time. On the other hand, we need to account for the fact that the Sweden Democrats have been very successful in electoral terms, significantly increasing their vote share in the most recent elections. From that point of view, the party has few incentives to change its masculine image, suggesting that one of the other two scenarios is more likely. Worth noting, in this case, is the fact that norms around gender balance are firmly established in the Swedish mainstream parties, and that makes it unlikely that they are easily affected by the male domination in a new radical right party. This leads us to the third scenario, in which the radical right party does not aim to feminize and where norms regarding women's inclusion remain robust within mainstream parties. Still, the question

remains: Why did mainstream right parties appoint so few women to parliamentary leadership positions after the 2022 elections? Is this a first sign of adverse contagion?

5. Methods and Material

The process of appointing leaders in parliament is a complex puzzle that primarily takes place within the political parties. As with candidate selection, these processes are hidden from public insight and shaped by a combination of formal rules and informal norms and practices that often favor male overrepresentation (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). To capture these processes, we draw on different sources of material, including formal regulations such as party statutes from all eight political parties, their national guidelines and policies for nomination and selection (for a list of these formal documents see the Supplementary File), as well as interviews with key actors. Between April 2023 and January 2024, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with persons with experience and insights into their parties' appointment processes (see Supplementary File, Table A1). Several respondents also had insights into their parties and the parliament's gender equality work. We interviewed at least two persons from each of the three mainstream right-wing parties in the governing coalition and the radical right support party (nine interviews in total). The interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes, and most were conducted through online video calls. The questions that guided the interviews revolved around four themes: (a) general principles for selecting leaders in their party, and more specifically, the importance of gender balance in this process; (b) the parties' standard procedures for appointing leading positions in parliament; (c) the process and outcome of the appointments to committee presidium posts after the 2022 election; and (d) the relation between the Sweden Democrats and gender equality norms in parliament. In addition, we included data on the political parties' actual appointments to different leading positions.

6. The Parliamentary Context: Principles for Appointments to Standing Committees

The Parliament's 16 committees are headed by a chair and a vice chair. The presidium posts are highly important and visible as these leaders plan and lead the committees' work and serve as the Parliament's highest representatives in their respective issue areas. According to the parliamentary statutes, the committee members elect their chair and vice chair (The Riksdag Act, 2014, chapter 12). In practice, however, according to an informal agreement between the party groups, the parties distribute the positions between themselves before the committees make the formal decision. Although the largest party in government has the formal right to occupy all presidium posts, as per custom, the opposition gets half of these leading positions: eight chairs and eight vice chairs. Consequently, each committee has a presidium consisting of one representative from the government and one from the opposition (R1). Part of this informal agreement is that the largest governing and opposition parties share their leadership positions with the smaller parties. The individuals who are to be appointed to a party's committee leadership positions are prepared by the individual parties according to party-specific procedures and criteria (R5, R8, R2). Here, the parties do not coordinate with each other (R2, R4, R5, R7). To take gender balance into account in this process is thus "up to the individual parties" (R2).

Until recently, the Social Democrats and the Moderates have been the main actors in this game, shifting governing power and holding most of these committee posts. While the smaller mainstream parties each have been given a few posts, the Sweden Democrats have, as mentioned above, been excluded from such

negotiations until 2022. After the 2022 elections, when the mainstream right started collaborating with the Sweden Democrats, they were rewarded with eight committee presidium posts in Parliament—four committee chairs and four vice committee chairs—including some of the most prestigious posts, such as the chairs of the committees on justice and foreign affairs. While the Sweden Democrats nominated eight men to their eight committee presidium posts, the three mainstream parties in the right-wing governing bloc were not much better, nominating only one woman in their eight positions. The fact that women's share overall in these positions did not decrease more is thanks to the opposition parties in the center-left-wing bloc, which nominated nine women and seven men to their sixteen positions. Taken together, women were appointed to 10 of the 32 committee leadership positions.

7. Political Parties' Selection Criteria and Appointment Processes

Turning to the parties' criteria for selection and appointments, our analysis shows that the three biggest parties in Parliament—the Social Democrats, the Moderates, and the Sweden Democrats—differ on the extent to which gender is considered in their selection procedures. Both the Social Democrats and the Moderates explicitly mention that gender-equal representation is an aim and a guiding principle for all nominations and appointments in their party documents (statutes and congress decisions). According to the respondents in these parties, support for gender-balanced representation (defined as a 60/40 principle) in the party is strong—the norm is "never discussed or questioned within the party" (R1, Social Democrats), described as "unbreakable" (R3, Social Democrats), or as "unquestioned within the party" (R4, The Moderates). While the Social Democrats appointed four women and six men to their presidium posts in 2022, following their internal 40/60 principle, the Moderates only appointed one woman in their four presidium posts. This is described as an "unfortunate outcome" (R4, R13) and a result of a combination of factors, such as the negotiation of committee chair positions with the other governing parties, where the Moderates ended up with fewer presidium posts than usual; experienced women who got cabinet minister posts who would otherwise continue as head of committees; and men with merits making them "reasonably and logically" suited to lead the particular committees in question (R4, R13). Yet, in appointing committee frontbenchers (MPs tasked to lead the party's work in a committee) the Moderates followed their principle of 40/60 and appointed seven women and nine men. Moreover, examining the top leading positions in the entire party (including the party leader, the party secretary, the group leader, and the two vice group leaders), as of January 2024, three out of five were women.

The PRR, the Sweden Democrats, in contrast, disregard gender balance as a relevant criterion in their appointment processes and do not mention gender in any official party document included in this analysis. According to our respondents, the party instead cherishes the principles of competence and experience in nominations and appointments: "The main thing is that we have the right person in the right place, the right people in the right positions; we don't have to have gender-balanced statistics like it is for other parties" (R6). Still, the respondents admit that more women in leading positions is desirable because it reflects the electorate and can attract more women voters (R6, R7). In the words of one respondent: "Of course, we want a balance and a mix" (R6). They are convinced, however, that women's representation will increase naturally over time (R6, R7). The party leader and the party group leader handle the appointments to parliamentary leadership positions. After the 2022 elections, the party appointed fifteen men and one woman as committee frontbenchers. Among these, eight men and no women were appointed to the party's committee chairs and vice chairs. This overwhelming male dominance was not raised as a problem in internal

discussions (R6, R7)—these men were simply seen as the most suitable for these tasks (R7). Also, the top leading positions in the party are dominated by men; in January 2024, three out of four are men.

The extent to which gender is considered in nomination procedures also varies across the smaller mainstream parties. While the Left Party and the Greens explicitly emphasize the importance of gender-equal representation in their party statutes, neither the Centre Party nor the Liberals do so. The Christian Democrats' statutes state that nomination committees should "consider different ethnic backgrounds, genders, age, competence, experience, profession, place of residence, interests, etc." when appointing party candidates. After the 2022 election, the Left Party was the only party that displayed perfect gender balance in their committee presidium posts—one woman and one man. The Greens and the Center Party appointed two women each to their two committee presidium posts, contributing to a gender-balanced distribution among the opposition parties. In contrast, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals appointed two men each, further strengthening the male dominance in committee leadership among the mainstream right-wing governing parties. Despite that, the respondents claim that these parties still maintain a norm of gender balance as an important criterion in appointment practices, although none favor quotas or fixed numbers (R10, R11, R12, R14). Notably, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats have a majority of women in the other top leading positions in their political parties—three out of four leading roles in each of the parties were held by women in January 2024.

8. Understanding the Sweden Democrats' Impact on Gender-Balanced Leadership

Based on our study, we see few apparent signs of positive contagion. The Sweden Democrats do not appear to seek to increase their representation of women in leading positions to adapt to the other parties' strong norms around gender balance. The party has not adopted a language or norm of gender balance, neither when it comes to political representation in general nor for leading positions. In contrast, even their women's section dismisses gender balance as a goal in itself (R6), and in practice, the party continues to be heavily male-dominated. The fact that this male dominance is not even discussed in the party might appear surprising, given that it operates in one of the world's most gender-equal political contexts. One explanation for this, in line with the findings of Weeks et al. (2023), might be the electoral success of this party. Since the party entered the Parliament in 2010, it has increased its vote share in every election, from 5.7% of the votes in 2010, 12.9% in 2014, 17.5% in 2018, to 20.5% in 2022. Notably, although the proportion of women MPs has increased over time (there are currently 27% women in a group of MPs), women are still almost entirely absent in leading positions in the party.

Given the general and significant decrease in women's representation in committee presidium posts in parliament, a more pertinent potential scenario is that of adverse contagion, where Sweden Democrats' male dominance spills over and negatively affects women's representation in the mainstream parties, especially those in the right-wing governing coalition. However, our analysis shows no immediate signs that norms around gender-balanced leadership are challenged in the mainstream parties. Not even the conservative Moderates display signs of adverse contagion in this regard. In fact, the Moderates is one of the parties with the most explicitly stated and formally regulated aim to strive towards gender balance in representation and other leading positions. Although the Moderates failed to achieve gender balance in their committee presidium posts, the party did appoint an equal share of men and women frontbenchers in the committees. Moreover, their party leadership comprises three women and two men, and the Moderate-led

cabinet includes twelve men and eleven women, conforming to the Swedish tradition of gender-balanced governments. In the government, the Moderates hold twelve ministerial posts (six men and six women), the Christian Democrats six posts (four men and two women), and the Liberals five posts (two men and three women). As for the other center-right parties, our analysis indicates that these parties still support the norm of gender balance. Thus, at this point, we see no direct signs of adverse contagion where male dominance in the electorally successful Sweden Democrats spills over to the other parties. Moreover, most respondents experience that representatives from the Sweden Democrats seldom directly challenge or oppose gender equality in different venues of parliament (R1, R4, R5, R8, R, 9, R10, R12, R13), not even in the Speaker's gender equality group where the party occupies one of the two chair positions (R9). Nevertheless, a few respondents experience that MPs from the Sweden Democrats downplay the importance of gender in policy discussions, for example, concerning labor market investments targeting women (R14) or in relation to appointments (R8).

In contrast, many respondents share the view that gender balance has been and still constitutes a strong norm in the Swedish Parliament and the mainstream political parties (R8, R4, R9, R3, R5, R1, R10, R11, R13, R14), that has not been affected by the entrance and growing support of the Sweden Democrats. Support for gender equality is described as "strong and increasing when it comes to values…the challenge lies in realizing them practice" (R9).

Nevertheless, to the knowledge of our respondents, there has not been any discussion about the current low share of women in committee presidium posts, neither within the parties nor on the parliamentary level. Notably, very few respondents were fully aware of the meager share of women in committee presidium posts. However, some had noted a tendency of male dominance, especially in the Sweden Democrats (R3, R8, R9). When informed about the gender composition in committee leadership positions, the respondents reacted with surprise and indignation: "This was news for me" (R5), "I am a bit surprised that it goes for all the governing parties" (R9), "there has been no discussion, yet…this is a bomb in terms of news value" (R3), and "that is 'to hell' " (R2). This lack of awareness might indicate that gender equality issues have ended up in the background of public attention, although the respondents' reactions indicate strong support for a gender balance norm. At this point, it is difficult to say whether this is the first sign of an erosion of such norms or a temporary decrease in attention due to turbulent political times.

In sum, male dominance in the Sweden Democrats does not appear to have affected norms around gender balance in the mainstream parties, at least not in the short run. Neither do we find clear signs that the Sweden Democrats have adapted to the other parties' norms or high levels of women in parliament or leadership. Instead, our findings are more in line with scenario three. The decrease of women in committee presidiums resulted, to a large extent, from continued male dominance in the Sweden Democrats, which appointed eight men, a considerable part of the committee presidium posts. As for the appointments in the other parties, the Moderates' failure to achieve gender balance is, according to them, the result of a combination of factors mainly related to the government formation process (R4, R13). The Christian Democrats and the Liberals, which only have two committee chair positions each, explain their appointments as part of a larger puzzle that included other leading positions (where women are in the majority). Also, the Liberals' prioritization of parliamentary experience in appointments and the fact that the Christian Democrats have a male-dominated group of MPs and many newly elected women were mentioned as part of the explanation for these parties' all-male nominations (R10, R11, R12, R14).

The sudden decrease in women's share of committee leadership positions showcases the importance of the institutional context in understanding the impact of radical right parties on gender-balanced representation. Much of the procedures in the Swedish Parliament are based on shared agreements and informal practices—no formal regulations safeguard gender balance. The Parliament's gender equality group (led by the Speaker and composed of MPs from all parties) is mentioned as a potential actor that could oppose or react to an uneven gender distribution in committee leadership positions (R8, R1, R13). Historically, this group has provided statistics on gender distribution across various positions in the parliament (Swedish Parliament, 2015; Erikson & Josefsson, 2021). However, to our knowledge, they have never critiqued individual party appointments. For this mandate period, the group plans to collect statistics on the share of men and women in different parliamentary positions to stimulate discussions within the parties on how to address any potential issues they identify (R9). Yet, the group has not (yet) reacted to the present situation (R9).

9. Concluding Discussion: The Challenge of Radical Right Parties and the Sustainability of Norms on Gender Balance

While previous research has explored how radical right parties influence mainstream parties' stances on immigration, less is known about how such parties influence mainstream rules, norms, and practices around gender equality. We argue that more research is needed on how radical right parties relate to and potentially challenge norms around women's inclusion and gender-balanced representation in mainstream parties. This knowledge is crucial to better understanding the foundation and sustainability of women's political representation. The Swedish case demonstrates that a strong track record of women's representation does not guarantee future success in this area.

In this article, we have outlined three scenarios to describe the potential role and impact of PRR parties in relation to gender balance in political representation. In a first scenario, we hypothesize that radical right parties adapt to gender balance in mainstream parties by increasing their share of women candidates and leaders. This is similar to what previous research has labeled positive contagion to describe how small progressive parties might incentivize larger parties to include more women in their ranks. Yet, researchers must also be open to the second scenario—that radical right parties may adversely affect women's representation in mainstream parties. What we label "adverse contagion" captures the negative influence that radical right parties may have on women's representation in mainstream parties. In such cases, conservative gender norms and male dominance spill over and affect women's inclusion in mainstream political parties. Given radical right parties' advancements in many countries worldwide and their quest against gender ideology, we see this adverse contagion as an apparent risk also to gender equality politics more broadly.

In the case under examination, committee chair assignments in the Swedish Parliament, we see no immediate and apparent signs of adverse contagion, where radical right male dominance is spilling over to mainstream parties. In contrast, norms around gender-balanced representation in leadership appear to remain strong and unquestioned in the mainstream parties. Nevertheless, there are no apparent signs of positive contagion either—that the Sweden Democrats adapt to the norms around gender balance in the other parties. Instead, we find that the Swedish case is most in line with the third scenario that we outline—where the radical right party neither adapts to nor affects norms around women's representation in

mainstream parties. This is somewhat expected due to the strong and longstanding norms around gendered balanced representation in the mainstream parties, on the one hand, and the electoral success of the radical right party, on the other hand. Thus, norms in the mainstream parties seem robust and sustainable, but the radical right party has few incentives to adapt to such norms when they are doing well electorally. Instead, the decrease in women's share of these leadership positions primarily appears to be a direct consequence of the Sweden Democrats' all-male appointments and unfortunate circumstances in the other parties. Yet, while the mainstream parties' failure to achieve gender balance might be temporary, the long-term impact of the radical right on norms on gender-balanced representation needs to be closely examined in the future.

Although this study's empirical findings depend on this specific context, and the extent to which they travel ultimately is an empirical question, the theoretical contribution of this study applies to any context where PRR parties are gaining ground. More research that probes the relevance of these scenarios in other political contexts is warranted, particularly with respect to how variation in PRR parties' electoral success and mainstream parties' support for women's inclusion matter for how PRR parties relate to and affect rules and norms around women's representation in mainstream political parties. There is, for instance, a possibility that in contexts where gender-balanced representation is more contested, intensified competition with a male-dominated PRR party may incentivize some mainstream parties to emphasize women's political inclusion and gender equality even more to distinguish themselves from their main competitors.

A final point worth highlighting is the potential institutional vulnerability that the Swedish case showcases. Despite strong norms of gender-balanced leadership across parties, few formal regulations on the party level and none on the parliamentary level safeguard gender balance in leading positions. Instead, these practices are entirely based on informal agreements and practices. Moreover, the parties do not coordinate to secure a gender-balanced outcome in the committee presidiums. While such informal arrangements based on goodwill may have taken Sweden far, it remains to be seen whether such institutional informality harms the sustainability and resilience of gender balance in the long run. In a world where anti-gender actors increasingly challenge gender equality, researchers must attend to questions of how the level of institutionalization and formality contributes to sustainable gender equality that persists even in the face of explicit threats.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. However, due to privacy restrictions, the data are not publicly available.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Beyond Rhetoric: The European Parliament as a Workplace for Parents and Current Reform Debates

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Abstract

Doing justice to their families and the political mandate is especially difficult for MEPs. Parents struggle to balance family obligations and work, particularly when the children are young. They undertake extensive journeys between their home constituencies and Brussels or Strasbourg. This taxing routine is further compounded by prolonged working hours, often devoid of leisurely weekends. In combination with the absence of a comprehensive parental leave policy, these challenges disproportionately affect parents of young children, particularly mothers, influencing the diversity and representation within the European Parliament. This study critically examines the existing conditions that shape the working environment of MEPs who are parents. It explores recent endeavors to reform these conditions and the underlying obstacles that hinder the progress of these reformative initiatives. Referring to relevant documents, this study first outlines formal regulations governing parental rights in the European Parliament. We then address informal rules and recent reform proposals using insight from MEP interviews. This examination investigates how parent MEPs assess working conditions and balance competing demands. Despite expectations, the European Parliament falls short of being as family-friendly as anticipated. Nevertheless, recent times have witnessed increased attention to the topic and various reform proposals. The obstacles posed by diverse national legacies and variant conceptions of MEP mandates and statuses for reform are highlighted.

Keywords

European Parliament; motherhood; parents; parliament as a workplace; reforms

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1. Introduction: Parents and Mandates

The EU, particularly the EP, advocates gender equality and family protection. The Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU states that "everyone shall have the right to protection from dismissal for a reason connected with maternity and the right to paid maternity leave and to parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child" (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000, Art. 33(2)). However, MEPs still lack genuine maternity or parental leave (see Soler, 2023) despite the charter and an early EU maternity leave directive (92/85) from 1992 (European Union, 1992). As MEP Claudia Gamon stated in a speech in June 2023:

> The European Parliament is the house of the people. It should be as diverse as the people of Europe are [...]. But the simple fact that there are no rules for parental leave, that there is no remote voting system, makes this house less diverse, and it infringes upon our rights as elected parliamentarians to represent our constituencies and to fulfill our mandate. It is undemocratic, and it is sexist. (EP, 2023)

This article presents a first exploration of the conditions faced by parent MEPs, probing the formal rules and informal challenges that shape the working environment for mothers and fathers (with young children) in the EP. In addition, it investigates how parent MEPs assess their working conditions and examines the ongoing debates regarding reform proposals to enhance the situation. This investigation underscores the gendered aspects of parental working conditions. It makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on parliamentary representation, parenthood, and gendered workplaces, particularly within the context of the EP. Furthermore, this research expands the scope of the literature on descriptive representation and the work–family balance of parents in parliaments by providing insight into the powerful EP. The study offers comprehensive knowledge of the rules governing parents in the EP, forming the foundation for an enhanced understanding of the descriptive and substantive representation of parents in future research.

The article also fills a gap in the existing research on parliaments as gendered workplaces by examining the working conditions of mothers in the EP. This study contributes valuable data to understanding the gendered nature of an extraordinary parliament: the EP. It adopts the "Gendered Workplace Approach" proposed by Erikson and Josefsson (2022) to determine whether the EP's work organization, infrastructure, and interactions between MEPs disadvantage mothers. This analysis is particularly relevant because a gendered workplace for mothers has representational consequences (e.g., Muriaas & Stavenes, 2023), resulting in fewer women among senior parliamentarians in national parliaments. "I know at least one person who has said that she is quitting as a parliamentarian because she can no longer reconcile this with her family" (Interviewee 1).

The EP stands out from other parliaments due to its diverse representation of parliamentarians elected from different countries. Within the EU, parental leave policies vary considerably, encompassing differences in duration and eligibility for fathers across member states. Notably, national and European parliamentarians are elected, unlike traditional employees. Parental leave regulations and other employee rights may therefore not extend to parliamentarians, with the individual and nontransferable mandate taking precedence over fundamental rights. Simultaneously, the EP itself has the power to determine the working conditions of MEPs. This analysis describes the unique rules applying to MEPs and details how diverging views on the legal status of MEPs prevent reform.

This article employs a convergent mixed-method design to examine the formal and informal rules and preconditions comprehensively for parents working in the EP. It combines analyses of official documents, media reports, and semi-structured interviews with MEPs to triangulate different research methods and provide insight into the rules, reforms, and challenges facing parent MEPs.

The research findings reveal that the EP falls short of being a family-friendly workplace for parliamentarians. With no parental leave, the absence of remote voting for parents dealing with childcare responsibilities, and significant travel distances for many MEPs, the situation for parents in the EP is challenging. The level of challenge varies for mothers and fathers, contingent on their personal and family circumstances, including the occupation of their spouses. The discussion details how individual MEPs and groups, primarily the parents themselves, actively advocate for reform. They stress the importance of officially recognizing parental leave within the EP rules. Crucially, MEPs advocate for remote voting options during parental leave and propose the possibility of transferring votes to enable parental MEPs to balance their duties and childcare effectively. However, these proposals face strong opposition. Critics, including some MEPs, express concerns about the potential misuse of remote voting and question its effects on democratic principles. The debates highlight the delicate balance between the rights of parent parliamentarians and the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy, particularly the personal and nontransferable mandate of parliamentarians.

This research goes beyond describing the status quo and identifying challenges. Based on the analyses, academic and media discussions are actively shaped by three concrete proposed reforms. First, officially recognizing parental leave in EP rules would be a progressive step, acknowledging and supporting parent MEPs. Second, implementing remote voting during parental leave (with safeguards to prevent misuse) could help MEPs effectively balance responsibilities. Last, introducing a hybrid model of online and in-person meetings, around 10% to 15% online, could enhance the EP's family-friendliness by accommodating the needs of MEPs with family commitments.

2. Parents in Parliaments and the Gendered Workplace Approach

In recent years, a growing body of literature has focused on analyzing the role of mothers in politics (Bryant & Hellwege, 2019; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). However, studies on fathers or parents in general are less common (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Franceschet et al., 2024). Previous studies have highlighted the dual burden that women carry when trying to combine children and political careers because of an unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities between mothers and fathers. This results in women entering politics and parliament later than their male counterparts and having fewer children, often called the "motherhood penalty" (Franceschet et al., 2016; Murray, 2010). Moreover, women face a "traditional gender socialization" that impedes their political entry due to traditional family roles and responsibilities (Fox & Lawless, 2004). Women who choose a political career are typically either childless or have fewer children on average than their male colleagues and the general population (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Hudde & Friedrich, 2019; Joshi & Goehrung, 2021).

Parliaments pose challenges for mothers and women due to an entrenched culture of masculinity because men have historically dominated parliaments (Lovenduski, 2005). However, the family-friendliness of parliaments has been overlooked (but see Franceschet & Xydias, 2024). This study contributes to the expanding literature

on gendered workplaces in parliaments (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Smrek, 2022; Verge, 2022) by examining the EP as a workplace for parents. The research focuses on elucidating the gendered nature of rules governing parents in this context.

A gender-equal parliament is one in which all politicians "are able to perform their tasks as legislators on equal terms, regardless of their gender, social background or identity" (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022). The EP stands out for its high female representation and commitment to gender equality. However, gendered patterns persist, hindering women's political career progression (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger, 2022; Kantola & Miller, 2022). As this article reveals, the EP is a particularly interesting case as a parliamentary workplace because its members come from diverse cultural backgrounds and national regulations relating to parents. This results in the EP being more family-friendly than national parliaments for some members but more challenging for others.

Feminist institutionalism (the foundation of the gendered workplace approach and the more general theory) underscores gender differences by highlighting the bias in accessing resources and power (Mackay et al., 2010). This theory distinguishes between formal written rules that regulate parliamentary work (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022) and informal rules comprising uncodified norms and practices collectively shaping behavior (Chappell & Mackay, 2017).

Based on feminist institutionalism, the gendered workplace approach (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022) examines parliaments as workplaces with formal and informal rules. The approach distinguishes between the organization of work, tasks and assignments, leadership, infrastructure, and interaction between politicians. This article provides an exploratory analysis of the formal and informal rules affecting parents in the EP and assesses their gendered nature. However, while Erikson and Josefsson revealed formal and informal rules in all five mentioned organizational aspects, this research focuses on potential disadvantages in work organization and infrastructure, revealing the gendered nature of the EP and its implications for representation. Therefore, formal rules encompass (a) work organization (e.g., statutes, regulations on attendance, duration of absence, or voting eligibility during sessions) and (b) the infrastructure, including the physical location and facilities of the EP (e.g., childcare amenities and access permissions to MEP offices; Erikson & Josefsson, 2022).

The informal aspect includes circumstances that are not formally written down but might affect parents' work in the EP, such as long working hours and meetings in the evening that can go into the night. Seen from a more general perspective, informal rules refer also to parenting norms (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022). Parents are confronted with different expectations of what parents should be and how they should behave. The EP, consisting of parliamentarians directly elected in 27 member states, combines different political groups, ideologies, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and political cultures. These divergent backgrounds also bring diverse attitudes regarding parenthood, such as who should raise the children or whether both parents should work. Although parenthood includes all parents, regardless of gender, the view of who is considered the primary carer may differ.

The EP is an extraordinary parliament because it comprises parliamentarians elected from different countries. To make that work, it underlies the principle of supranationalism, the member states' willingness to shift their competencies to the EU level. Parental leave regulations, like other social policies, lie within the

power of the EU member states. Parental leave policies, such as the duration and eligibility for fathers, vary widely across the member states. Being a guardian of gender equality and social standards, the EU forces all member states to apply minimum standards to the protection of pregnant employees—14 weeks of maternity leave, two weeks of which must occur before birth (European Union, 1992, Art. 8) and secures paid maternal and parental leave (European Union, 2019, Art. 4, 5). However, applying these regulations to national parliamentarians depends on their status. Unlike traditional employees, M(E)Ps are elected, "which has implications for relationships at the workplace and labour law coverage" (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 21). Therefore, in some EU member states, such as Poland, legal parental leave regulations do not extend to parliamentarians and individual mandates and parliamentary office priorities take precedence over the individual rights of parents. The varying status of parliamentarians reflects the tension between the democratic principle of holding a personal mandate and the individual rights of MEPs.

In other EU countries, notably those with comprehensive parental leave regulations for national parliamentarians, these rules formally apply to their MEPs (e.g., Sweden). However, the EP holds the authority to define the rights and duties of MEPs in its members' statutes, and these rights and obligations are uniform for all MEPs. Consequently, national rules and rights pertaining to MEPs from a particular country are not enacted or enforced. Establishing a standardized parental leave policy for all member states necessitates amending the statute of EP members. However, achieving consensus on this matter proves challenging due to the diverse traditions and cultural backgrounds across the EU, as demonstrated by several unsuccessful reform movements (see Section 5) organized by several groups of MEPs.

In summary, this article contributes to the scarce but growing literature on parents in parliament. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this study is the first on parenthood and the parliament as a gendered workplace in a supranational parliament (the EP). The aim is to identify challenges and actions to improve parents' situations. Even though it is only a first analysis of who is responsible for and could improve parents' situations in the EP, the study indicates the particular challenges and the importance of studying the EP as a workplace for parents. The MEPs are from diverse cultural backgrounds and legislations. Whether these national regulations apply to parliamentarians, such as MEPs, differs between countries. At the same time, the EP has authority over the working conditions of MEPs, which might make it more challenging to reach a consensus regarding reforms within the EP. This article is explorative due to knowing little about parental working conditions in parliaments or parents in the EP. Thus, there are no strong expectations regarding the working conditions of parents in the EP. However, based on characterizing the EP as a relatively women-friendly parliament with a comparably high share of female members and judging the EP by its own standards (see Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000), one could expect it to protect mothers and parents.

3. Methodology and Data

This article applies a convergent parallel mixed-method design to understand under which formal and informal rules and preconditions parents work in the EP. The analyses of official documents and media reports to determine the formal rules are combined with semi-structured interviews to learn about informal rules, ongoing discussions, reform proposals, and parents' experiences. This research design allows the triangulation of research methods and provides a comprehensive analysis of the rules and reforms of the EP as a workplace. Additionally, this article presents recent reform initiatives, analyzes the ongoing debate, and discusses potential challenges these initiatives may encounter.

The first step is to gather data on formal rules for parents in the EP from various sources, including official documents such as the Statute for the Members of the European Parliament (2005) and the decisions implementing it (European Parliament, 2009), reports from European institutions (Bonewit, 2016), and media and newspapers articles (e.g., Rebhan, 2021; Weiss, 2021).

The second step is employing insights from the interviews with MEPs to examine the informal rules in the EP and gather perspectives on ongoing reform initiatives. During the interviews, MEPs were asked which reforms they propose to improve their situation in the EP. From December 2022 to October 2023, 11 semi-structured expert interviews with MEPs currently in office (each having children of various ages) were conducted. The interviews started with some questions about the number and age of the children of the MEP, followed by an open question about how the daily life of the MEP and the work–family balance is structured and perceived. The sequence and wording of interview questions varied, but the main interview questions were "Do you feel (your) children affect your everyday work as a European Parliamentarian, and if so, how?" and "What are the biggest challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance?" Subsequently, interviewees were usually asked which differences, if any, they perceive between mothers and fathers and what they can tell us about the current reform proposals to make the EP more family-friendly.

Finally, the MEPs' opinions on the debated reform proposals and their ideas for improvement were solicited. The recruitment process for the interviews involved reaching out to MEPs through the chair of the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality and direct contact, with subsequent contact determined by previous interview agreements. The aim was to achieve a representative sample regarding gender, age group, and EP party group (country) for MEPs. The final interview sample included four (36%) women, maintaining rough representativeness. However, due to self-selection bias, the age group with younger children (below 12) and younger MEPs (seven below 50) is overrepresented, whereas the age group above 60 (one MEP) is slightly underrepresented. Among the interviewed MEPs, one belonged to the Green party group, two were nonattached or from the far-right (ID) group, three were Social Democrats, and five were members of the Conservatives. The sample tends to over-represent large party groups, lacking representation from the left, the center-right (ECR), and liberal groups in the EP. Interviewees were from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Portugal. The time MEPs, particularly parent MEPs, have for academic interviews is limited, and MEPs tend to give interviews only rarely and on topics that interest them. Thus, the composition of the interview sample could be influenced only to a limited degree, and self-selection bias cannot be excluded. Hence, the population of MEPs who agreed to interview only partially represents parent MEPs.

4. EP as a Workplace for Parents

The rights and duties of the MEPs have been defined by national legislation for many years. Because MEPs were predominantly treated the same as national parliamentarians, the compensation or pension of MEPs and the rules applying to mothers varied widely. Signed in 2001, the Treaty of Nice set out to align conditions for all MEPs by granting the EP the right to "lay down the regulations and general conditions governing the performance of the duties of its Members" (Treaty of Nice, 2001, Art. 4(6)). Soon after the Treaty of Nice entered into force (on January 2, 2003), the EP submitted the draft of a Members' Statute to the other EU institutions. Following some revisions requested by the Council, the Statute for the Members of the European

Parliament was adopted in 2005 and entered into force in July 2009, 30 years after the EP was established (Statute for the Members of the European Parliament, 2005).

Implementing the Statute, the Bureau of the EP decided in the spring of 2008 that "Member(s) expecting a child shall be excused attendance at official meetings of Parliament" for three months before and six months after the birth of a child (European Parliament, 2009, Art. 31(4)). However, this regulation relates only to the MEPs giving birth (mothers). No official regulation exists regarding parental leave for fathers or parental leave beyond the mentioned six months for mothers. In addition, the adoption of a child is not included.

In 2021, Michael Bloss, an MEP from the German Green Party, was one of the first fathers who (publicly) announced that he would take part-time parental leave during his mandate. Within the framework of their free mandate, this leave is guaranteed and protected by EP rules. The MEPs are free to exercise their mandate as desired. The only constraint to this "voluntary parental leave" is posed by the pay cut if the MEP is absent from at least half of the plenary sessions (European Parliament, 2009, Art. 31(2)).

A more critical obstacle to parental leave as an MEP is that the mandate (and, most importantly, voting) can only be exercised in person. Hence, unlike in the Danish Volketing, there is no replacement for MEPs during parental leave. Moreover, if parents are required to be present in Strasbourg or Brussels, questions like whether mothers take their (breastfed) babies to parliament or who takes care of the children remain.

Taking a (small) child to plenary is theoretically allowed but not welcome in the eyes of many MEPs. The former Italian MEP Licia Ronzulli brought her daughter to plenary many times and received considerable media attention as a result ("It was maternal," 2010). The EP building in Brussels also hosts a "family room." Furthermore, there are daycare facilities and kindergartens in three locations: Strasbourg, Brussels, and Luxembourg. In Brussels, the EP offers daycare for children between three months and four years old and has reserved spots in several private daycares. In Strasbourg, the EP runs one daycare for children between three and 42 months and a second one at the European School Strasbourg. Finally, Luxembourg has two daycares for MEPs and EP personnel.

The coronavirus pandemic has increased home-office possibilities for parliamentarians. However, pandemic regulations have also made life for parents of small children and, particularly for breastfeeding mothers, more difficult, as current regulations forbid anyone who is not employed by or a member of the EP to enter the building, which applies to babies.

5. Increasing the Family-Friendliness of the EP: Opinions and Reform Initiatives

In the interviews with current MEPs, their perspectives on the family-friendliness of the EP as a workplace and their suggestions for improvement were explored, considering their gender, personal, and family situations. Responses, particularly from parents of young children, both fathers and mothers, paint a negative picture of the EP as a workplace. Some believe it is not accommodating to parliamentarians with younger children, expressing such sentiments as "it feels like the whole system is built for old men that want to get away from their wives" (Interviewee 3). The reason for this is the lack of a parent—or gender-sensitive parliament and of formal rules ensuring family-friendliness, such as parental leave. The interviewed parents also did not indicate any informal mechanisms, such as informal party substitution, which would help to accommodate parents in

the EP. This outcome is surprising given that the leadership of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, the Intergroup on Demographic Challenges, Family-Work Balance and Youth Transitions, and a large group of MEPs attach great importance to the issue.

While all interviewed MEPs acknowledged the challenges mothers faced, especially during the weeks after childbirth or while breastfeeding, opinions on the EP's overall family-friendliness and necessary reforms significantly diverged. Fathers, including those with young children, often find it comparatively easier to balance family and mandate, leading them to perceive reforms as less urgent. Based on their member state and partner's occupation, the interviews highlighted that parent MEPs either relocate their families to Brussels or Strasbourg or travel, leaving their partner and children behind. Many young parents, particularly mothers with families in more distant countries, identified the frequent travel and the necessity to be away every week as the most significant burden (Interviewee 3; see also Frech, 2024). While the 2020–2022 coronavirus pandemic was a devastating time for many worldwide, it revealed to parent MEPs of young children that it was possible to balance being present for their children and fulfilling their mandate. During the extraordinary circumstances, the EP transitioned to online or hybrid meetings, allowing remote voting and ensuring the EP's functionality. When the EP reverted to in-person meetings and voting after the pandemic, parent MEPs expressed a desire for the EP to retain the benefits of remote meetings (Interviewees 3, 5, and 11). "During the pandemic, it was very good because everything was digital, and that's also why I sort of took the opportunity to have a child during that period. Otherwise, I think I wouldn't have done it" (Interviewee 3).

Furthermore, the MEPs criticized the organization of work in the EP, arguing that the option for mothers to stay home for six months does not constitute genuine maternal leave. The absent MEP cannot be replaced in plenary voting and lacks remote voting, leading to pressure to attend despite being allowed to stay home. One MEP explained: "sometimes, we lose or win with one vote. So, the pressure is there to go" (Interviewee 5). Consequently, MEPs with young children and advocates of gender equality consistently demand the EP to retain remote voting for parents (Interviewees 1, 3, 7, and 9). An informal group of young parents from various countries and major political groups initiated lobbying efforts to retain remote voting rights after the pandemic. Despite discussions with the EP leadership and optimism fueled by the EP president, Roberta Metsola, being a young woman and mother of four children, their efforts were unsuccessful (Interviewee 1).

In the interviews and during discussions in the EP, opponents pointed to the democratic value of gathering and discussing physically:

> Us representing European voters means that we gather in one place, that we really exchange views, that we debate, that we talk in the corridors. And I really think that helps us not to go into some kind of really parallel societies in terms of different Member States, but also in terms of different political views. (Interviewee 6)

In the interviews, similar arguments were raised against the proposal to transfer the vote of MEPs on parental leave to another MEP or the party delegation or fraction, pointing to the EP not being a "classical employer" (Interviewee 8) and the mandate being personal and nontransferable (Interviewee 9). The concept of a parliamentary mandate being personal and nontransferable is applied in several European countries. For instance, the constitutionally mandated personal exercise of the mandate is evident among the parliamentarians of the Czech Chamber of Deputies and members of the Polish Sejm are explicitly not

considered employees (Bonewit, 2016). Arguments have been made regarding the potential unconstitutionality of parental leave (with a replacement) in German parliaments (see Wahlmann, 2020). Conversely, certain (mostly Nordic) countries permit their national parliamentarians extensive parental leave and even allow replacements during their absence (Bonewit, 2016). These diverse legal interpretations in European member states and diverging parenting norms contribute to the ongoing debate in the EP and determine the informal rules and constraints parent MEPs face.

Among the more formal steps MEPs have recently undertaken to make the EP more parent-friendly are amendments to existing legislative proposals. For example, one amendment has been added to budgetary matters to include the possibility of parental leave in the budget, i.e., the multiannual financial framework (Interviewee 5).

In the summer of 2023, the media reported on three pregnant MEPs leading a campaign for "Parental leave in the European Parliament" (see Wax, 2023). A group of 13 MEPs joined the Dutch MEP Lara Wolters, the Austrian MEP Claudia Gamon, and the French MEP Le'la Chaibi and proposed reforms to make the EP more parent-friendly in their Motherhood Manifest (Wax, 2023). In June of 2023, the group submitted a petition for parental leave to EP President Roberta Metsola. The initiative advocated three changes. The first proposed change is the "official recognition of parental leave in the rules of procedure, so some sort of status or that makes it clear, we're on parental leave" (Interviewee 9). This official recognition aims to prevent mothers who give birth during their mandate from having low attendance rates due to parental leave and from being unfairly portrayed as lazy or taking advantage. While the EP can modify its rules of procedure, the EP administration, citing the freedom of the mandate, did not perceive a compelling reason to do so. The second proposal, advocating remote voting for parents after childbirth, faced rejection from the EP leadership due to privacy and security concerns and fears of potential misuse by MEPs avoiding travel (Interviewee 9). The third proposal is even more contentious, suggesting the ability for parents to transfer their votes during maternity or parental leave to a colleague or delegation leader. The principle of a personal nontransferable mandate poses a significant hurdle, making introducing this change seem hopeless to parents and the initiators. A modification of electoral laws would be necessary to enable vote transfers or the replacement of MEPs during parental leave (Interviewee 9).

Beyond the debate on the personal mandate versus the (working) rights of parents and representational concerns, opponents of parental leave in the EP have raised several arguments. First, some (predominantly male) MEPs argue that they enjoy generous compensation and pensions and are (like most other politicians) envied and frowned upon by a growing part of society. Their image would be further harmed if they could stay home for extended periods during their mandate (Interviewee 8). Second, many MEPs would likely choose remote voting if allowed, potentially diminishing the EP's power and democratic quality (Interviewee 9). Finally, opponents emphasized the power and privilege of MEPs, asserting that making sacrifices comes with the special responsibility of making decisions for millions of people (Interviewee 10).

The parent MEPs highlight several more minor changes that could enhance their situation. First, their families' access to the EP infrastructure (buildings) is a notable concern. Private individuals, including family members, are typically restricted from entering MEP offices and buildings. The suggestion of having a "family day" without plenary work emerged as an idea, providing an opportunity for MEPs to show their children where they work (Interviewee 6).

Second, MEPs would like to coordinate traveling times better with school vacations and holidays. Many MEPs are part of a delegation traveling regularly to various parts of the world. The EP rules restrict their travels to so-called green weeks (constituency weeks), which often fall into school vacations around public holidays. Scheduling delegation travels during other weeks, possibly committee weeks, would be more accommodating for school-aged children (Interviewee 10).

The third proposal for improvement of the parents' situations is more contested than the first two. Some have argued that, instead of meeting once a month for three and a half days, one could reduce the number of sessions in Brussels or Strasbourg by meeting for five days. Agreement on this proposal depends on where MEPs have their families—in Belgium or far away in their home country. In addition, being away for more days in a row is a solution not everybody prefers (Interviewee 10).

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The EP is renowned as a women-friendly parliament and fighter for equal opportunities for women and the rights of parents. However, is it a good place for parents? The central question of this article revolves around the formal rules and informal working conditions governing parent MEPs, their self-evaluation of these conditions, and the ongoing debates surrounding reform proposals. The described working conditions of parents and potential reforms are gendered; thus, a substantial challenge for mothers might not affect fathers at all.

The descriptive, explorative analysis of the parental working conditions in the EP has illuminated the challenging landscape parent MEPs navigate, marked by extensive travel, prolonged working hours, and a conspicuous absence of (comprehensive) parental leave policies. Despite the EU's commitment to gender equality and family protection, the EP falls short of providing a genuinely family-friendly environment for its members and performs poorly regarding family-friendliness by the parents of young children.

This analysis affirms that the formal conditions for parents in the EP are far from ideal. The lack of a genuine parental leave poses a significant challenge, especially for mothers during pregnancy, post-birth, and the breastfeeding period. Although MEPs can be absent from plenary sessions and replaced in committees for a period after childbirth, the inability to designate a substitute during voting sessions and the prohibition on online voting creates substantial pressure on parent MEPs to forgo parental leave.

Furthermore, this analysis highlights how the mix of responsibilities between the EP and member states complicates reforms in the EP. The primary challenges for reforms of EP rules for parent MEPs are the varying parenting norms and concepts of the democratic mandate of European parliamentarians. Certain member states, and consequently MEPs, have argued that the parliamentary mandate is personal and non-transferable. This perspective makes it challenging to introduce a replacement for MEPs on parental leave. The daily and informal challenges of parent MEPs predominantly relate to traveling considerable distances between parliament and family. Those with young children find traveling between the constituency and parliament challenging, particularly when the distance between Brussels or Strasbourg and the family home is significant. In addition, as with most other informal challenges, mothers suffer more from being away from their children, which is likely due to social norms that expect mothers to be with their children and take a larger share of caretaking. Although only a small number of parents were interviewed,

fathers reported more often than mothers that their partner stays home with the children, leading to their work–family balance being perceived as less problematic. The MEPs' interactions usually exclude children as a topic, leading to parents feeling alone and often not knowing whether their colleagues have children.

In response to the identified challenges, this study actively contributes to the ongoing discourse by suggesting three concrete reforms. First, official recognition of parental leave within EP rules would lend a more progressive touch and make parent MEPs feel acknowledged. Recognizing parental leave would alleviate concerns, such as negative attendance scores resulting from missed plenary sittings and reduce unnecessary requests from colleagues and journalists. Second, the recommendations extend to implementing remote voting options, specifically during parental leave, enabling MEPs to balance their responsibilities and family commitments effectively. This option would be exclusive to parents on parental leave to prevent misuse. The third proposed reform to create a more family-friendly EP involves introducing a hybrid model of online and in-person meetings. While acknowledging the importance of in-person interactions, a modest portion (10% to 15%) of online meetings scheduled on specific days or weeks (e.g., during school holidays or public holidays) would improve the balance between family and parliamentary duties.

This analysis of the formal and informal working conditions of parents in the EP revealed challenging circumstances despite the EP's reputation of being gender-friendly. The EP is a particularly challenging case for implementing gender-friendly or parent-friendly reforms due to diverse national legacies and differing conceptions of MEP mandates, presenting formidable obstacles to reform initiatives. Thus, this article underscores the complexity of addressing these problems on a pan-European scale and highlights the uneven attention given to challenges faced by parents with political careers in Europe.

The exploration of parenthood in the EP offers avenues for future research to understand the specific experiences of fathers and mothers better, considering the diverse individual and familial circumstances that shape their parliamentary engagements. Furthermore, investigating the potential influence of proposed reforms on the functioning of the EP and the representation of diverse voices remains a crucial area for future inquiry. Additionally, comparative studies across parliamentary systems could provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of various reform models.

In conclusion, this study underscores the imperative for the EP to evolve into a more inclusive and accommodating workplace for parents. The proposed reforms and the dialogue initiated by this research aim to inform and inspire further discussion and hopefully contribute to reshaping the EP into a genuinely representative and supportive institution for all its members, regardless of parental status.

Acknowledgments

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ARTICLE

Methodological Reflections on Studying Gender-Sensitive Parliaments Cross-Nationally: A "Most Significant Change" Approach

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Abstract

Whilst cross-national comparative analyses provide distinct opportunities for the study of gender-sensitive parliaments, the inherent challenge in conducting comparisons necessitates a continued search for innovative methods. This article responds to this need by proposing the "most significant change" (MSC) approach (Davies & Dart, 2005), which centres on collecting and analysing "stories of significant change." Drawing on our own application of MSC in an international study commissioned by INTER PARES, we show that MSC's bottom-up, inductive, and participatory approach proved valuable in uncovering hitherto unknown instances of gender-sensitive changes across countries, illuminating the broader impact of such changes beyond parliaments and incorporating practitioners' perspectives. The flexibility of MSC also enabled context-specific applications, which we illustrate through three examples from Cyprus, Germany, and Trinidad & Tobago. By offering a complementary approach to compare parliaments' gender sensitivity across countries, our study provides a novel perspective for future comparative analyses in the field.

Keywords

comparative politics; gender equality; gender-sensitive parliaments; parliaments; research methods

1. Introduction

Gender-sensitive parliaments are increasingly recognized as an international norm (Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Palmieri & Baker, 2022). International organizations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have played important roles in promoting this

norm, offering valuable resources such as guides, toolkits, and (self-)assessment tools (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016, 2023; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2021; Smith, 2022). Existing studies have outlined core elements of gender-sensitive parliaments across different regions and countries (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, 2001; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019; Palmieri, 2010). Additionally, single-country studies have shed light on the practical implementation of parliamentary commitments to gender sensitivity and on the role played by critical actors and institutional change (Childs, 2016; Childs & Challender, 2019; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Erikson & Freidenvall, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Palmieri, 2010; Verge, 2022b). Together, these studies provide rich accounts of how gender sensitivity, as a political objective and policy tool, developed from initial commitment to implementation (or lack thereof) in different countries.

However, amidst this wealth of information, the conditions for, and consequences of, gender-sensitive parliaments have rarely been considered. This is partly explained by the fact that the cross-country comparisons necessary to pin down the conditions and effects face methodological challenges due to the wide diversity of women's representation in parliaments worldwide (cf. Inter-Parliamentary Union's monthly ranking of women in national parliaments), the implementation of gender mainstreaming (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2021), and their overall national ranking in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2021).

In addressing the methodological challenges in studying gender-sensitive parliaments, we identify possibilities for systematic cross-national comparisons. More precisely, we suggest that adapting the "most significant change" (MSC) approach (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005) to parliamentary settings offers a complementary method for the comparative analysis of gender-sensitive parliaments. Building on our own application of the method in a cross-national study on gender equality in parliaments commissioned by INTER PARES, we show that this approach offers a viable solution to challenges such as accommodating contextual differences (Palmieri & Baker, 2022), handling diverse starting points (Childs & Palmieri, 2023), and coping with dissimilar cases and a lack of comparative data (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2023). Importantly, the suggested methodological approach is versatile and applicable across a broad variety of contexts regardless of a parliament's formal commitment to gender sensitivity. Likewise, it can extend to the study of other characteristics like race, ethnicity, or disability in parliaments, or to political institutions like ministries or public services.

We begin with an overview of common approaches to studying gender-sensitive parliaments, before delving into the MSC approach and describing how we implemented it in practice. Through illustrations of "stories of change" (SoCs), we highlight the advantages of this approach for cross-national comparisons and engage with the remaining challenges. We conclude with implications for future comparative research on gender-sensitive parliaments.

2. Common Approaches to Studying Gender-Sensitive Parliaments

A gender-sensitive parliament, as defined by Childs and Palmieri (2023, p. 177), "values and prioritises gender equality as a social, economic and political objective and reorients and transforms a parliament's institutional culture, processes and practices, and outputs towards these objectives." This definition emphasizes that achieving gender equality requires a shift in parliamentary processes, culture, and outputs,

and demands responsibility from parliaments themselves. The roots of the concept can be traced to the 2001 report by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Associations' study group, entitled *Gender Sensitizing Commonwealth Parliaments*. Over the past two decades, international organizations and parliamentary associations have increasingly committed to this norm. This also led to the increase in studies on gender-sensitive parliaments, each highlighting diverse methodological approaches. To unpick these approaches, we reviewed 33 studies of gender-sensitive parliaments published between 2001 (after the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's report) and 2023, including research reports, policy guides, and academic works in English. Studies were selected by searching for terms like "gender sensitivity" or "gender-sensitive parliaments" in the title and/or abstract.

Our review categorized studies based on their case design (single-case or comparative) and the methods used (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed). In differentiating single case and comparative designs, we follow Gerring (2004, p. 342) who defines a single-case study as "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. A unit connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon…observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time." A "single-case" study thus studies one parliament, usually during one legislative term. Single-case studies of gender-sensitive parliaments analyse either a parliament's gender sensitivity comprehensively or address specific aspects such as gender-focused parliamentary bodies (Childs, 2022) or symbolic representation (Verge, 2022b).

In contrast, comparative studies examine at least two cases, ranging from international cross-national studies of multiple parliaments to studies analysing a small number of cases within one country (e.g., comparing national and regional parliaments). Large-N global studies of (national) parliaments are prevalent, commonly undertaken by international organisations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2011, 2012), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (2001), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2021), Ahrens and Erzeel (2024), and the European Institute for Gender Equality (2019). The methods predominantly used were surveys (using tick-boxes and open questions) completed by various stakeholders within parliamentary bodies, including the parliamentary administration, parliamentary staff, individual MPs, party groups, and parliamentary authorities. Sometimes, surveys were combined with small case studies (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2021) or interviews (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022).

While including different countries, studies also reflect different research goals. Some offer descriptive accounts of the initiatives developed by parliaments (Centre on Constitutional Change, 2023; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009, 2011, 2018; Smith, 2022) or monitor change (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2023; Palmieri, 2010), whilst others focus on developing principles and guidelines for measuring parliaments' gender sensitivity (Ashe, 2022; Childs, 2020; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016, 2023). Studies with explicit comparative *analyses*, entailing the systematic study of "patterns of similarities and differences" across cases (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011, p. 138), are scarcer. In this respect, an analytical approach studies different manifestations and outcomes of gender-sensitive change, exploring how and why they differ across countries, and with what result. We contribute to the latter—analytical—approach, building on the methodological considerations of studies on gender-sensitive parliaments discussed above, and aligning them with the objectives of comparative political analysis. We identify three research goals for a comparative cross-national analysis of gender-sensitive parliaments.

The first is *to explore diversity in parliaments' gender sensitivity across countries*. Meaningful comparative political analysis "explores diversity" across cases (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011, p. 45), precisely because it reveals new initiatives, forms, manifestations, and effects of gender sensitivity. Building on the tradition of comparative ethnography, comparing parliaments can also help to reveal differences in "the dynamics, meanings and practices" (Simmons & Smith, 2019, p. 352) that shape gender-sensitive parliaments. Examining new or overlooked cases that do not fit the general pattern may pose challenges. For example, studying gender-sensitive parliaments becomes more difficult in countries where gender equality norms do not seamlessly align with the political climate or where initiatives are scarce. While only a few parliaments have formally embarked on becoming more gender-sensitive, many have taken partial steps, necessitating consideration of these variations. Comparing dissimilar cases introduces additional challenges in finding comparable data across countries (Kroeber, 2018) and dealing with data skewness. In such instances, it becomes imperative to gather alternative data at relatively low cost (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2023).

The second is *to generate theories in the study of gender-sensitive parliaments*. Comparing cases yields valuable insights into how gender-sensitive parliaments operate and how change occurs across contexts, which enhances the development of (new) theories (see Ragin & Amoroso, 2011, p. 48; Simmons & Smith, 2019). Theoretical advances often require a profound comprehension of the cases being studied, and may entail "situated comparisons" (McCall, 2005) involving the analysis of gender-sensitive parliaments within their specific political, historical, and cultural contexts. Ideally, a comparative analysis of gender sensitivity considers the diverse starting points of parliaments (Childs & Palmieri, 2023), along with the role of local contexts and their interaction with global norms (Palmieri & Baker, 2022).

The third is *to facilitate comparative learning*. Beyond scientific benefits, comparative analysis offers policy-related advantages. By comparing parliaments across countries, scholars can critically evaluate the impact and outcomes of different gender-sensitive rules, policies, and practices, identifying more or less successful strategies across different settings. This process promotes policy learning and the identification of best practice which, in turn, enhances comparative analysis (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2020). While not every parliament may be prepared to fully commit to the process of gender sensitivity, and some may grapple with their unique contexts, parliaments can inspire and learn from each other. This mutual exchange can initiate steps, or facilitate the transition, towards gender sensitivity.

Conducting cross-national comparisons of parliaments is thus a complex undertaking. While we do not claim that the MSC approach, introduced as a methodological innovation in this article, can address all these challenges, we assert its potential to address some of the issues described above. Before delving into this aspect, the following section introduces the MSC approach and outlines its application for our cross-national study.

3. The MSC Approach: Principles, Practice, and Implementation in the INTER PARES Study

The MSC approach comprises collecting, interpreting, and analysing stories of significant change from the perspectives of stakeholders and others directly involved (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 8). Participants are asked to reflect on significant changes that occurred because of a particular program or initiative, through "stories of who did what, when and why—and the reasons why the event was important" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 8).

While MSC is closely related to story-telling methods and participatory action research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Maiter et al., 2008), it offers distinct practical and theoretical advantages. Unlike participatory action research, where participants are typically involved in all stages of the research process (Selenger, 1997), MSC strategically engages stakeholders in the collection, selection, and interpretation of SoCs. This leads to a more focused approach which is particularly beneficial in contexts where time constraints or the risk of overburdening participants are predominant (Davies & Dart, 2005).

In MSC, a "story" pertains to "an account of change told in response to a specific question (i.e., 'what was the most significant change that occurred for you in the last month as a result of the program?')" (Dart & Davies, 2003, p. 141). Stories are collected in verbal or written form (e.g., interviews, diaries, open-ended survey questions; Dart & Davies, 2003). In written form, stories are typically between one and two pages long (Serrat, 2017).

The approach has been used hitherto primarily as a monitoring and evaluation tool offering information on changes brought about by policy programs and their outcomes (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 8). What distinguishes MSC from other monitoring and evaluation techniques is that:

> (i) the focus is on the unexpected (rather than predetermined quantitative indicators that do not tell stakeholders what they do not know they need to know), (ii) information about change is documented in text, not numbers, (iii) major attention is given to explicit value judgments, and (iv) information is analysed through a structured social process. (Serrat, 2017, p. 36)

MSC is intrinsically a qualitative and participatory method with no quantitative measurements or pre-defined "quantifiable" indicators (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005). Instead, "stories" from those involved in the field give insights, which illuminate how change happens and with what result. The MSC approach is especially useful in documenting the complexity of social change and explaining how different actors and stakeholders perceive and evaluate realities (Davies & Dart, 2005). As a participatory method, researchers spend considerable time deliberating with practitioners and experts to engender finer-grained interpretations and evaluations of changes and outcomes (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005).

For comparative research, this approach is arguably better suited to "case-based" rather than "variable-based" comparisons. Case-based comparisons study the "various configurations of a set of attributes" (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011, p. 318) applying a deeper interrogation of complex phenomena (e.g., gender-sensitive parliaments), as it is compatible with in-depth and smaller-N approaches. In contrast, variable-based comparisons assess the relationship between two or more distinct variables (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011), which calls for more quantitative approaches.

3.1. Background of the INTER PARES Study

We applied the MSC approach to an international comparative study of gender-sensitive parliaments commissioned by INTER PARES (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024). The study included the national parliaments of all 27 EU member states and 16 other countries closely connected with INTER PARES (Bhutan, The Gambia, Malaysia, Malawi, Maldives, Trinidad & Tobago, Panama, El Salvador, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Niger, Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, Montenegro, Guinea Bissau). Together, the study covered 43 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America (incl. the Caribbean). While this was not a representative global study, the selection of

parliaments did offer a wide variation of characteristics, inter alia: socio-cultural; political; and institutional factors including the level of gender equality; the type of parliament; regime type; electoral and party systems; use of gender quotas. Hence, the selection facilitated the consideration of contextual differences and different starting points when analysing the gender sensitivity of parliaments.

The study relied on data triangulation and included several methodological components:

- Online survey with parliamentary administration (multi-lingual) to collect data on parliaments' formal and informal gender-sensitive rules and practices (gender-equal representation, gender-sensitive legislation and oversight, parliamentary work organization, gender-sensitive infrastructures, engaging with interest groups and experts);
- Semi-structured interviews with selected participants to collect SoCs;
- Written input on gender-sensitive changes from a small number of parliamentary gender equality bodies and academic experts;
- Review of academic and grey literature on gender-sensitive parliaments, as well as additional review of women's descriptive representation in parliaments using third-party data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

The online survey with parliamentary administrations was sent via contact details provided by INTER PARES. In most cases, the survey was sent to one contact per parliamentary chamber. These persons either completed the survey themselves or forwarded it to other members of the administration/staff who then completed different parts of the survey corresponding to their areas of expertise. To foster comparability, the survey questionnaire built on similar studies undertaken by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and collected data on the formal and informal gender-sensitive rules and practices established by parliaments. It alternated between closed and open-ended questions, with the former focusing on the presence of actors, rules, and practices, and the latter on good practices, examples, and SoCs. Qualtrics software was used for distribution of the surveys (although the option was given to respondents to complete the survey in a Word file). Twenty-four out of 61 parliamentary chambers in 21 countries completed the survey. Most respondents (17 out of 24) were administration and staff members, but occasionally MPs or parliamentary leadership answered. Fourteen participants identified as female, four as male, and the remaining ones preferred not to say or did not answer this question. The surveys included informed consent forms and offered anonymity in line with national and EU data protection legislation. Most participants voluntarily added their contact details for follow-up. Throughout, INTER PARES and an international advisory group provided guidance. After the survey was completed, semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted with selected participants to collect more data on relevant SoCs. In total, nine interviews were conducted in as many national parliaments. One or more respondents took part in each interview, depending on their different areas of expertise. The interview questions collected more detailed information on gender-sensitive changes, the process leading to change, the identification of critical actors and obstacles in the process, the effects of the proposed change, and recommendations for other parliaments.

INTER PARES' study proposal had already promoted the idea of collecting inspiring SoCs, a descriptor mirroring the MSC approach. We envisaged that respondents—building on their practical experience—would

suggest SoCs which demonstrate completed changes rather than plans. The SoCs focused on "monitoring intermediate outcomes and impact" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 9). In line with the MSC approach, SoCs must be understood in context, i.e., some SoCs are not necessarily a good example for other parliaments because they occupy different contexts like (non-)existing gender-sensitive processes. Expecting that most parliaments had not started a formal process towards becoming a "gender-sensitive parliament," we trusted that any example illustrating progress would help other parliaments to either become stepwise more gender-sensitive or committed to a fully-fledged formal process. Consequently, we asked respondents to share SoCs through open-ended survey questions and follow-up interviews. SoCs were thus conceptualized as complementary to the quantitative survey indicators (Dart & Davies, 2003) and part of a broader project relying on data triangulation.

3.2. Implementing MSC in the INTER PARES Study

The MSC approach usually involves several research steps, which may vary in content depending on the specific program or initiative. In their practical guide to MSC, Davies and Dart (2005, p. 15) identify 10 steps, of which steps 4, 5, and 6 are considered to be "fundamental" and the remaining "discretionary" in conducting the MSC process. The 10 steps include (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 15):

1. Getting started with the approach;
2. Identifying "domains of change";
3. Defining the reporting period;
4. Collecting SoCs;
5. Reviewing the stories and selecting the most significant stories by a stakeholder committee;
6. Feedback to stakeholders regarding selected stories and selection criteria;
7. Verifying the stories if necessary;
8. Quantification;
9. Secondary analysis of the stories;
10. Revising the MSC process.

We implemented MSC in five steps:

1. *Identifying domains of change*: Potential SoCs were originally identified through the survey with parliamentary administrations and the written input from equality bodies and academic experts. Given the variety of parliaments, expectable gender-sensitive changes and outcomes were initially unclear as were the appropriate criteria for identifying and evaluating them. We considered revealing the importance or significance of a variety of changes core to the project. Although domains of change can be "deliberately fuzzy" in MSC to "allow people to have different interpretations of what constitutes change in that area" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 18), participants needed guidance in conceiving stories to report. We therefore asked participants to relate significant changes to the survey domains which were primarily identified top-down, i.e., by researchers, practitioners, experts from INTER PARES, and the advisory group. However, participants could propose alternative domains in the questionnaire.

2. *Collecting SoCs*: To collect SoCs, we used the open-ended survey questions and additional written input from stakeholders. We invited participants to share them in any format (undefined word count, no style guidelines, etc.), and to send additional information (e.g., websites, documents, press releases,

etc.) if available. They were encouraged to add stories for any appropriate domain of change and assess themselves what constituted a "significant change." The survey question was a variation of: "What was a recent example of [domain] that was successfully adopted/implemented by the parliament? Which measure was particularly successful in improving the parliament's gender sensitivity or that *you* consider to be good practice or a significant achievement? Please explain below and/or provide relevant links to documents. In case online links are not available, feel free to send the files directly via email" (emphasis in original). Our understanding of change focused on both formal and informal gender-sensitive changes. We clarified to respondents in our introduction letter that formal rules and procedures are usually codified in written form and operate with clear enforcement mechanisms. Informal rules and practices are customary routines, traditions, values, beliefs, and norms of behaviour embedded in everyday parliamentary practices. We asked participants to include facts and to elaborate on the significance of the initiative according to their opinion (Davies & Dart, 2005). The survey with the parliamentary administration contained several useful responses, although the information provided was sometimes limited to a few sentences or links. All stories were collected virtually through fieldwork. While this simplified practicalities, it had downsides for the verification of stories (see below in this section).

3. *Selecting the most significant stories:* The selection process involved a collaborative effort with a stakeholder committee consisting of researchers, practitioners from INTER PARES, academic experts, and parliamentary liaison officers. At the initial stage, researchers, and actors from INTER PARES compiled potential stories from the survey and read and rated them. Consistent with the MSC approach, we reviewed the preliminary SoCs in close and transparent exchange with INTER PARES to "select the single most significant account of change within each of the domains" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 10). The exchange allowed for the selection criteria to be adjusted, when needed, to serve the interests of the study (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 10). Our selection criteria comprised (a) picking "extraordinary" stories (i.e., SoCs surpassing examples contained in other publications; e.g., examples emphasizing a new topic or initiative, or a previously overlooked dimension of gender-sensitive parliaments), (b) stories from particularly "gender-unequal" parliaments which often remain underexplored, (c) representing a diversity of countries and parliamentary settings, (d) stories demonstrating broader societal effects (where initiatives do not only change how parliaments function, but potentially change society by e.g., fostering democratic engagement among citizens or leading to the adoption of gender equal legislation), and (e) stories with potential transferability to other parliaments/contexts. These criteria were openly discussed and reported in the research report to avoid a selection bias (Dart & Davies, 2003). After agreeing on criteria, we deliberated with INTER PARES about which higher-rated stories to prioritize and why. Selecting SoCs was thus an iterative ranking process during which everyone elaborated on why stories were significant or not and what constituted a "significant" change and outcome. Since not all topics considered relevant by INTER PARES and us authors were covered sufficiently, we activated additional channels to assemble supplementary SoCs (inviting academic experts; INTER PARES (re)contacting liaison officers). The final selection was agreed upon by the entire stakeholder committee. If there were disagreements, we favoured stories able to reflect the diversity of initiatives and cross-national context variation. In total, 14 SoCs from an original 47 were selected for follow-up.

4. *Additional collection and review of stories*: We re-contacted the respondents of the selected SoCs. In the compilation of the SoCs, we developed guiding questions on four themes (cf. Supplementary Material): (a) form of change and basic facts, (b) process leading to change and (critical) actors involved, (c) effect

of change, and (d) recommendations for other parliaments. Moreover, we also offered to conduct an interview; an option usually accepted. Here, we differ somewhat from other MSC studies because we did not include interviews in the earlier stages. Given that time is "a precious commodity" (Busby, 2013, p. 146) in parliaments, we decided to put as few time demands as possible on participants. For parliaments, it was inappropriate to collect more stories than necessary, thus we focused on a subsample based on the ranking. In total, we selected and compiled 14 full SoCs. For nine of these, we conducted interviews to elaborate the selected SoCs; whilst five were gathered from academics or practitioners. Participants either directly wrote a one- to two-page-long SoC, or they were transcribed and edited by us with the opportunity for participants to review the SoC as often as necessary before they were included in the final publication.

5. *Conducting secondary analysis of all stories*: We analysed the stories and embedded broader findings in the INTER PARES publication (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024). The SoCs provided important details by highlighting significant changes that stood out when compared to previous research. Their presentations focused on drivers of change, critical actors and their motivations, opportunities and thresholds provided by institutional and political contexts, and ways forward. Except for a few stories, most were not anonymized as approved by the participants to credit parliaments and changemakers.

We consciously omitted a systematic and in-depth verification of SoCs (step 7). Verification is not a fundamental step in MSC, and is arguably contradictory to it, given the emphasis on gathering insights into the experiences and values of participants, and less the collection of factual data. Verification is also unnecessary when committee members who select stories "have background knowledge of the events described in the stories" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 37). In line with other studies (Dart & Davies, 2003), we avoided stories that presented as factually incorrect. Yet, limited study resources rendered it impossible to systematically check each story's accuracy by visiting the parliaments in person, or to exchange with a broader audience inside the parliament. Verification was limited to cross-checking written rules and documents whenever possible, but since SoCs mostly documented an innovative and recent change, this written material was not easily available.

Our study also highlighted the strategic precautions researchers can take when using the MSC approach to identify impactful SoCs. Parliaments can share important insights when prompted by open questions, making checklists insufficient for that purpose. In this respect, initial data collection relies on contacts who can generate a multiplier/liaison function in parliament, of those who are aware of potential SoCs and related other actors. Public or parliamentary documentation (media, parliamentary publications) of the SoCs provides additional evidence of actual impact. More generally, we trusted that individuals willing to be interviewed about a SoC had valuable insights to share; those who declined also did not respond to other inquiries or declared early in the exchange that change was yet to be detected. Utilizing targeted questions originating from research helps to collect essential details about a SoC, ensuring that their selection was not arbitrary. Finally, a major advantage was the constant exchanges with practitioners from INTER PARES who had context-related knowledge on each parliament.

4. Gains and Challenges of the MSC Approach

The bottom-up, inductive, and participatory MSC approach generated major insights into *unknown* and *unexpected* changes and exceeded our expectations of the initiative. The comprehensive practitioners' SoCs

substantiated and complemented the more quantitative survey results by shedding light on the conditions for change and on the work of "critical actors" as the driving forces behind change (Childs & Krook, 2009). The SoCs helped recognize how different gender-sensitive parliaments' domains (gender-equal representation, gender in policy-making and oversight, gendered parliamentary organization and infrastructures, engaging with interest groups and experts) are interconnected and influence each other. The MSC approach also facilitated a better understanding of the overall "reach" of gender-sensitive initiatives. While initiatives clearly fostered gender equality *within* parliaments, they also had an impact *beyond* parliament (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024).

4.1. Gains of SoCs—Three Illustrative Cases

We present three of 14 SoCs from Cyprus, Germany, and Trinidad & Tobago to illustrate how the MSC approach contributed to the discovery of significant changes that would have likely been overlooked otherwise (see full stories in Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024). The cases were chosen because the topics were both novel and differed from those usually covered in large-N comparisons presenting best practices, case studies, and in-depth country-specific case studies. Likewise, we consider them good examples for showing the advantage of the MSC approach, that is, revealing of nuances in institutional change, thereby also allowing for further theorization of gender-sensitive parliaments. One drawback of our study, however, was the "success bias" that we discuss in detail in Section 4.2.

The three national parliaments had not formally started gender-sensitive parliament processes and rank in the World Economic Forum *Global Gender Gap Report* of 2021 as number 11 (Germany), 37 (Trinidad & Tobago), and 83 (Cyprus; World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 10); thus, they represent different starting points as regards their national context.

Cyprus mentioned several examples in their survey, for instance, new laws, measures on sexual harassment, and citizen events. Ultimately, a shadowing program for female students aged 17–18 by the female president of the parliament and other women MPs was selected. Decisive was its novelty, its implementation in a parliament with a comparatively low women's share—a measure uncovered in previous studies—and, finally, expected transferability.

The interview with practitioners, however, revealed that the shadowing program impacted gender equality both *inside* the parliament and *outside* in society. It reached into society by mobilizing young women to enter politics in a country with male-dominated politics, and was educative in terms of exchanging with the president and the MPs on gender equality. After the successful initial year, the program was extended to include women's empowerment training by a non-governmental organization for students and parliamentary staff, which became a permanent gender training seminar in 2023 for all parliamentary interns. The societal effects and the institutionalization—originally invisible—were strongly emphasized by the interviewees.

The German SoC was interesting because it demonstrated the specific practitioners' knowledge and the usefulness of MSC in detecting significant change. Originally, Germany skipped the open survey questions, but in the expert survey an academic mentioned a citizens' event on menopause organized by two women MPs in the parliamentary buildings. First, we collected public information on the event (website, newspapers), contacted the MPs for more information, and requested an interview. The German SoC was

selected because stories on civil society engagement and public outreach were extremely rare; they are an under-researched aspect of gender-sensitive parliaments (but see e.g., Siregar & Prihatini, 2024; Verge, 2022a, 2022b). Additionally, menopause-related health issues are a taboo topic in most societies despite affecting millions of women continuously for several years.

Usually, parliamentary events operate with standard stakeholders (medical associations, pharma industry, health insurance companies). In contrast, the MPs invited gynaecologists who specialized in menopause, two female best-selling authors, professional menopause societies, several activists, and community groups. It was also open to interested citizens (invited through social media), which extended the event from the initially planned 20 to finally 150 attendees.

Similar to Cyprus, the practitioners reported several positive side-effects: hosting the event in a parliamentary building symbolized political interest for participants and secured media coverage; those affected felt that their voices were heard; the large audience generated networking opportunities and raised awareness among fellow MPs across genders and party lines; parliamentary committees joined forces to propose changes to medical fees and university curricula. Importantly, verifying the SoCs was partly enabled by a cross-comparison with independent podcasts, newspapers, and tweets on the event.

Trinidad & Tobago inserted their SoC in the infrastructure part of the survey. It was selected because the topic was arts and spoke to symbolic representation, a rarely explored in-depth aspect of gender-sensitive parliaments (but see Verge, 2022a, 2022b). Trinidad & Tobago also improved geographical diversity not covered by previous studies. Whilst we were interested in gender-equal representation in exhibitions and/or exhibitions on women's rights and gender equality, the SoC revealed various other changes. After renovations, the central lobby was reopened early 2020 as The Rotunda Gallery. Since International Women's Day 2020, the gallery has featured annual exhibitions on gender issues, covering topics like "Women in Science," still a male-dominated field. Next to artwork, often by women artists, the exhibitions provided informational briefs and biographies, thereby offering details on the cultural context of the work. While male artists were accepted for the International Women's Day exhibitions, women artists mostly displayed their work, serving to increase their visibility and helping them connect with commercial galleries.

Importantly, the gallery is open to the public and anybody can send artwork, which attracts many children and students. Given an ethnically diverse society, the parliament collaborates with many organisations, among whom are the East Indian women's organization, the Syrian and Lebanese Women's Association, and UN Women. According to the practitioners, the exhibitions had a positive impact on the parliament, because public tours drew visitors from those not usually present in parliament, potentially boosting their political engagement.

Why are these three SoCs currently useful for cross-national comparisons of gender-sensitive parliaments? Despite the obvious differences, analysing them (shadowing, health policy, arts) revealed common themes. In all three cases, the significant change—initially invisible—comprised better citizen engagement, albeit on different levels. In Cyprus and Germany, "critical actors" (Childs & Krook, 2009, p. 138) such as the Cypriot female parliamentary president and two German women MPs led the activities. Likewise, Cyprus and Trinidad & Tobago included change specifically for the younger generation. As we envisaged, practitioners shared "the

unexpected" instead of simply quantitative indicators, and change was documented in text and not numbers, including value judgements (Serrat, 2017, p. 36).

The MSC approach aligned with the positionality of our research, "animated by the purpose of social transformation…and a recognition of the diversities of feminist knowledges," set to "promote inclusionary inquiry that recognises the political concerns of marginalised groups and the political power of those gathering the data" (Ackerly & True, 2018, pp. 262, 268). We did not request specific stories, rather we trusted participants to identify them in their contextual knowledge. Similarly, we adhered to a dialogical (feminist) process throughout to understand different contexts and logics (Ackerly & True, 2018).

Eventually, the MSC approach enabled us to gain insights into practitioners' experiences with gender-sensitive initiatives. While other analytical methods can also achieve this goal (see Banerjee & Rai, 2024; Childs, 2024), comparing across different settings and gathering what happens "on the ground" in parliaments by putting participants' perceptions of key steps and outcomes centre stage embedded in the research a distinctive richness. Comparing their situated knowledge illuminated how different contexts shape and interact with individual experiences.

4.2. Remaining Challenges of the MSC Approach

While the MSC approach offered distinct gains for comparing gender-sensitive changes in parliaments, we encountered challenges: (a) the (non-)verification of SoCs, (b) commitment costs for participants and the institution, (c) constraints shaped by parliamentary cultures, and (d) the focus on "positive" or "successful" stories. We discuss these challenges below.

First, as illustrated above, systematic verification or cross-checking of SoCs was seldom employed in our MSC approach; instead, we focused mainly on collecting narratives, allowing experiences and perceptions of participants to take centre stage, rather than the pursuit of less supple evidence. Nevertheless, being restricted in the systematic checking of each story generated limitations regarding our third research goal, comparative learning (see Section 2). Learning would entail providing parliaments with lessons on what other parliaments are already doing, whether and how their initiatives can fit other contexts, and learning from their "failures" (Rose, 2004). The MSC's focus on stories was certainly beneficial from a parliamentary peer-to-peer learning perspective, yet, relying on *reported* changes and thus successful stories (see below in-this section) potentially hindered any learning from "failures." Whether the reports reflected what had happened in practice was ultimately unverifiable, thus making it more difficult to formulate policy recommendations.

Secondly, our approach required significant participant commitment from within and outside parliaments, including experts, parliamentary administrations and staff, MPs, civil society actors, and academics. The process involved frequent meetings, discussions, and feedback with different experts. Conducting our research mainly online, and without visits on the ground, significantly reduced costs compared to other modes of data collection. Yet, some practitioners and parliaments needed to be contacted several times, and like any other study, we relied considerably on participants' willingness to provide examples and undertake research, whilst doing their daily work. MSC is therefore not a "cheap" approach in terms of human and financial resources. This poses a greater challenge to less well-resourced countries and parliaments and to

new/transitioning democracies often with limited financial and organizational means for additional tasks. Despite this, through its focus on narratives, MSC offers a good alternative for relatively low-cost data collection in comparison to large-N survey research or large-scale monitoring. Moreover, as one innovative data source, MSC is valuable for data triangulation. Especially when data is inconclusive (e.g., when self-reported actions contradict evidence on the ground), data triangulation is required, and a multi/mixed-method approach strongly advised.

Thirdly, our approach to MSC demands a parliamentary culture "where it is acceptable to discuss things that go wrong as well as success…[there should be] a willingness to try something different" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 13). In some parliaments, those for instance with a limited democratic culture (i.e., norms of transparency, openness, responsiveness, and participation are not valued; cf. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023), and with few activities on gender equality issues, this posed a threshold. This was a potent reminder that studying gender-sensitive changes, how they emerge, and what effect they have, are initiatives contingent upon the broader institutional culture and local context (see also Childs & Palmieri, 2023). While MSC facilitates considering institutional cultures, local contexts, and values in data collection and analysis, it cannot circumvent the broader political context in which parliaments operate, which determines opportunities for scientific research.

Finally, focusing on "significant" changes unsurprisingly triggered "positive" or "successful" stories. None of the stories reported a significant change that hindered the gender equality or gender sensitivity of parliaments. Unquestionably, this was due to the overall ambition of the project to highlight parliamentary accomplishments, best practices, and innovative initiatives inspiring parliamentary peer-to-peer learning. We tried to counter this by surveying for factors "hindering" change and asking surveys and interviews about "lessons learned" (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 19) to address negative changes in a more positive tone. However, participants either skipped these questions or answered them reluctantly. Despite feedback rounds and offers of anonymity, we suspect that critical reflections were thwarted because participants knew their stories would be published. Concentrating on "positive" or "successful" stories potentially hindered "the advancement of (new) theories," our second research goal (see Section 2). Without "negative" cases (i.e., where change was restricted, hindered, or undetectable), it is more difficult to comparatively establish which conditions lead to change, and which do not.

5. Conclusion

By offering methods to explore diversity across parliaments, advancing theories, and enhancing comparative learning, systematic cross-national comparative analysis offers distinct opportunities to study gender-sensitive parliaments. However, the inherent challenges in conducting such comparisons necessitate an ongoing search for innovative methodological approaches.

We employed the MSC approach (Davies & Dart, 2005) as a novel methodology for studying gender-sensitive parliaments. Drawing on our application of MSC in an international study, we found distinct advantages for comparative analysis of gender-sensitive parliaments. Its bottom-up, inductive, and participatory nature proved valuable in revealing hitherto unknown gender-sensitive changes across countries, shedding light on the broader impact of gender-sensitive initiatives beyond parliament, and incorporating practitioners' and participants' viewpoints. This, in turn, provided opportunities for

theory-building and comparative learning. Moreover, the flexibility of the approach allowed context-specific applications, making it adaptable to various cases and dimensions of gender-sensitive parliaments, such as parliamentary representation, parliamentary workplaces, gendered policy-making, and parliamentary outreach. Its focus on collecting "stories" or "narratives" also proved beneficial in countries where alternative data are scarce.

Our application of the MSC approach also revealed challenges related to issues such as story verification, commitment costs for participants and the institution, constraints related to parliamentary culture, and the focus on "positive" or "successful" stories. Some of these align with challenges faced by other research methods, such as verification issues in interviews and survey responses, and commitment costs in participatory research. Some limitations were inherent to our design: Our focus on noteworthy examples primarily yielded positive stories, causing a "success bias." Future research should explore ways to incorporate "negative" or "unsuccessful" stories and the views of critics (see also Dart & Davies, 2003). This would enhance our understanding of when and why change occurs, or does not, shedding light on the roles not only of "critical actors" (Childs & Krook, 2009) but also "veto players" and "oppositional forces," particularly significant during times of gender backlash, which also has importance for comparative learning.

The participatory elements of the MSC approach hold promise for future research in, for instance, understanding how citizens experience gender-sensitive parliaments. Although our study did not incorporate the low-threshold nature of the MSC approach, it is particularly well-suited to gather citizens' experiences and learn how initiatives impact citizens' lives. In addition, other studies have shown that people enjoy taking part in such storytelling processes (Dart & Davies, 2003).

While our study offered a first application of the MSC approach in parliamentary settings, it is important to consider the time constraints within which parliaments operate. Our deviation from the initial MSC protocol, collecting short summaries before collecting the full SoCs, highlights the adaptability of the approach, but warrants further testing in future research. Our study further suggests MSC is a valuable tool for the study of institutional dynamics in parliaments or other political institutions. Variant forms of institutionalism have been successful in explaining institutional stability; accounting for institutional change, however, has proven more difficult (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Peters, 2012). The MSC approach can generate innovative insights into internally induced change, which—in our study—only became detectable because those internally involved classified it as important. Future research could actively engage internal expertise to detect institutional change (positive or negative) rather than looking for a specific measure. The focus on change can also reveal how parliaments (or other political institutions) address diversity aspects such as race, ethnicity, and disability.

Finally, as a tool initially developed to study and monitor development programs, we have shown that MSC can be used to monitor and evaluate different stages and outcomes of policy programs and processes more broadly. It has specific advantages for evaluating bottom-up initiatives with stakeholder involvement, especially where the focus is on policy learning, and where quantitative monitoring data is insufficient or undesired (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005).

board members for the lively and inspiring discussions on the full study. We would also like to thank Sarah Amighetti and Johan Browet for their support in collecting several "stories of change." We received helpful comments and feedback on an earlier article draft from the discussant Sophie Kopsch and other participants at the hybrid workshop "Gender and Parliament" at Tampere University, Finland. Finally, we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for engaging with the article and for providing critical and constructive comments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Parliament as a Workplace: Dilemmas of Vernacularisation and Professionalisation

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Abstract

In this article, we engage with recent calls to research parliaments as gendered workplaces, which build on earlier international discursive turn and institutional reform initiatives towards gender-sensitive parliaments. Our engagement explores this workplace framing and how well it translates across pluralised, global parliamentary paradigms. We develop our arguments with a special focus on the Indian parliament as a gendered institution. Viewing the parliament as a gendered workplace through an intersectional lens, we show how gender dynamics and institutional configurations of power are embedded in class, race, and caste inequalities but can shift over time through reflexive challenges. We organise our discussion through two approaches to studying parliaments as workplaces—vernacular and professional—to argue that paying attention to these approaches critically can contribute to sensitising the workplace debate to a more capacious, theoretically nuanced reading of parliaments as more gender-sensitive, gender-inclusive, and gender-responsive representative institutions. In outlining the case for paying attention to the vernacular critically, we ask whether such an understanding can help to effectively bridge local and global understandings of parliaments as workplaces and institutionalise them. In studying professionalisation, we examine the paradox that professionalisation could lead to the depoliticisation of parliaments, which might affect the nature of gender-sensitivity that is being institutionalised. This analysis thus brings together institutional, postcolonial, and intersectional strands of work to think anew about gender-equal political practices in representative bodies.

Keywords

gender; Indian parliament; intersectional; parliaments; professional; vernacular; workplace

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1. Introduction

Feminist institutionalists have pushed the paradigm of parliament as workplace as an essential "action area" towards creating and improving "gender-sensitive infrastructure and parliamentary culture" (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017, p. 16). This encompasses bringing workplace reforms that promote gender equality in the parliamentary arena, implementing which would make legislative spaces safer and more accessible for MPs, such as maternity leaves, childcare benefits, and protection (and recourse to justice and redressal) against workplace sexual harassment for legislators as well as parliamentary staff (Childs, 2016). In this article, we suggest that translating this paradigm globally, however, could be messy in practice. We follow two broad approaches to translating this framework from theory to practice—the vernacularisation and the professionalisation of parliaments—and expand on the dilemmas both lenses present with elucidating insights from the Indian parliament. This article is thus a theoretical exploration of the boundaries of the "parliament as workplace" framework.

Building on our theoretical work on parliaments as representative institutions, and empirical work on the Indian parliament, in this article we set out the following propositions as interventions in the debate on parliament as workplace. First, that we need intersectional analysis embedded in class, race, and caste inequalities that can shift over time through reflexive challenges to understand the gender dynamics of institutional configurations of power. Second, methodologically, we develop a more expansive gendered approach by applying a "politics and performance" framework (PPF) which pays attention to both representative politics of parliaments as well as its aesthetics. Third, that a critical vernacular approach to parliament as workplace can help to effectively bridge local and global understandings of gendered parliamentary reform. Finally, we suggest that the lens of professionalisation can provide us with useful insights towards studying gender-sensitive parliaments, although there are varying interpretations, manifestations, and unintended consequences to this framing in democratic systems across the world.

There is a considerable feminist literature that centres parliaments as gendered institutions and spaces (Childs, 2016; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Rai, 2010; Rai & Johnson, 2014; Rai & Spary, 2019; Sawer et al., 2006). Parliaments are representative in different ways—of populations/constituencies, of party programmes, but also of societal structure and power relations. They are also institutions that are internally organised and simultaneously shaped by the gendered and masculinist nature of external political organisations like political parties, which play an active role in fashioning how parliaments function (Childs & Murray, 2014; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). Parliaments around the world thus not only reflect gender inequality but also reproduce it (Palmieri, 2011, 2022; Rai, 2010). Women MPs negotiate parliamentary spaces often as "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004), as they navigate and perform their plural representational roles (Rai & Spary, 2019). The push for gender-sensitive parliaments has gained momentum over the decades, building on foundational interventions by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Palmieri, 2011), to have become a "truly global political phenomenon" today (Childs & Palmieri, 2023, p. 174), with feminist institutionalist scholars outlining ways in which reforms can be effected transnationally. Within this scholarship, one recent intervention has been to suggest that framing parliaments as workplaces can help us institutionalise gender-sensitivity and reform in parliaments (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Erikson & Verge, 2022). This paradigm has been useful in bridging scholarship with practice (Childs, 2016; Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017; Palmieri, 2011). In this article, we build on this scholarship and this paradigm, and ask how translatable this framework is across different parliamentary contexts, and what is

lost in translation. We map the complexities encountered in the transfer and application of the idea of "gendered parliamentary workplace" and suggest that scholarship focused on analyses of cases largely from the Global North cannot capture this complexity. This complexity is only exacerbated by the exceptionality of the parliament as a workplace.

We suggest that the enhancement of the parliament as workplace paradigm with PPF can better capture essential aspects of parliamentary politics in practice across gendered institutional cultures and allows for more critical approaches to the professionalisation of parliaments and the vernacularisation of parliamentary reform.

2. Politics and Performance: A Methodology to Study Workplaces

The exceptionality of parliament and parliamentary life can be seen not only in issues of representation, immunity, and longevity, but also in the fact that compared to other governance institutions, it is also more visibly performative. Like other institutions, parliaments make a claim—a representative claim (Saward, 2006)—which we can study through what Rai has called a "politics and performance framework" (PPF; Rai, 2014). Rai has developed this framework through her engagement with the Indian parliament and her work on gendered ceremony and ritual over two decades (Rai, 2010, 2014; Rai & Spary, 2019, 2022)—grounded in ethnographic analysis, interviews, and archival work. The first author of the current article is writing her doctoral thesis on the legal and political performances related to political parties in India and has interviewed MPs, political party leaders, lawyers representing political parties, as well as democratic activists dealing with the Indian party system. PPF allows us to make visible how institutions perform the rules and norms that they are governed by through paying attention to the embodied nature of representation, viewing the institution as a set of rules but also a space/stage through and on which somatic norms are established, performed, reproduced, and challenged. It also helps us focus on voice—an important element of representative theory—not only in terms of electoral representation but also in terms of speech acts, vocabularies, and timbre which is more or less easily understood and received, alongside labour involved in learning and producing performances. The latter is important as those who are "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004) in an institutional matrix have to labour much harder to navigate their ways through organisational spaces.

Because they are socially embedded, political performances can be either consolidative or challenging of institutional norms, and they can be individual or collective, and "smooth"/felicitous such that they are readily accepted as legitimate or not (Rai, 2015; Saward, 2010, pp. 35–56). Given the diversity of audience for parliamentary performances—MPs, party leaders and members, constituents, and the voting public—performances can be seen as complex and liminal; they can be disrupted, challenged through counter-performances, or accepted and appreciated. If we treat parliaments as workplaces, then analysing these performances through PPF can help us understand how the exceptionalism of parliament interacts with gendered experiences in and of parliaments. Finally, PPF insists on a historical and contextual approach to studying gendered politics—the long histories of colonialism, settler colonialism, capitalism, and state interventions all shape institutional development, and attention to these can be read through the performances of MPs, the rules they are governed by, and the scripts that they promote—both verbally and aesthetically, through ceremonies and rituals, and how these are interpreted. As we also show below, the PPF lens can help us understand our arguments about vernacularisation and professionalisation, about intersectionality and depoliticisation critically.

In the next sub-section, we briefly outline the institutional structure of the Indian parliament. The Indian parliament is the product of a long history of national struggle to gain independence from British rule. However, its roots are also embedded in the colonial governance of dissent. The Council of States that was envisaged by the British colonial government was a response to the growing demands for representation by the Indian national movement. At the time of independence, the representative system favoured by the postcolonial state reflects the entangled political history of colonialism—despite some calls to find a different system, the familiarity of the Westminster system meant that the Indian parliament was framed as a parliamentary institution based on a bi-cameral, first-past-the-post representation, with opposing political parties competing in the electoral field every five years (Rai & Spary, 2019, pp. 29–59). We map the plural and dynamic workplaces within the Indian parliament to show that the workplace framework needs to expand to take on board not only the frontstage—the Chambers and the Committees, for example—but also the backstage of parliamentary institutions. We think through how this affects our understanding of parliament as a workplace.

2.1. Parliamentary Workplaces and Workstages

It is important to note that, even as the emerging scholarship on the parliamentary workplace focuses primarily on MPs, the parliament as a workplace is heterogenous and includes several other groups of actors/workers (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Krook, 2018; Palmieri, 2011). The parliament cannot be framed as a workplace sufficiently without taking into account the institutional position of the MP as a "worker" in a legal context of a particular parliament, the institutional and financial relationship between political parties and their MPs in specific parliaments, and the relationship between MPs, political parties, parliamentary secretariats, and the employees who work in MPs' offices, for example. Thus, the MP does not remain only a worker, but also is often an employer. Based on our reading of workplaces in the Indian parliament, we see the following interlocking and overlapping spaces in parliament that need to be considered within the workplace framework. We have visualised this as a map of the parliamentary workplaces of an MP in India in Figure 1.

Through this visualisation of parliamentary spaces/stages, we suggest that cohesive gender reform in parliamentary workspaces would require including these groups of actors within the fold of the "parliamentary workplace." Our study of political parties, parliamentary training units, and parliamentary bureaucracy shows how these interconnected "backstages" are as important as the "frontstage" of parliamentary chambers, where MPs are the primary actors. An intersectional approach to the parliament as a workplace would also map the overlaps, tensions, and interchange (of power, resources, perceptions of gender, and institutional hierarchies) across these different groups. Even as we keep MPs at the centre of the analysis/gendered reform, mapping the overlaps of these multiple and simultaneous workspaces/ workplaces/workstages within and in relation to which women MPs operate opens different territories of potential "reform."

A rudimentary mapping of the different overlapping and interlocking workplaces reflects the key elements that need to be factored in to understand the gendered workplace and how the institutional processes must be reimagined and refashioned considering intersectional gender equality. Class, caste, race, and sexuality all come into play across these gendered spaces, modes of interactions, and liminal performances. Such a mapping also locates parliamentary processes within the shifts and overlaps in parliamentary workplaces. The sources of funding and resources across these overlapping workplaces also shift over time, adding layers
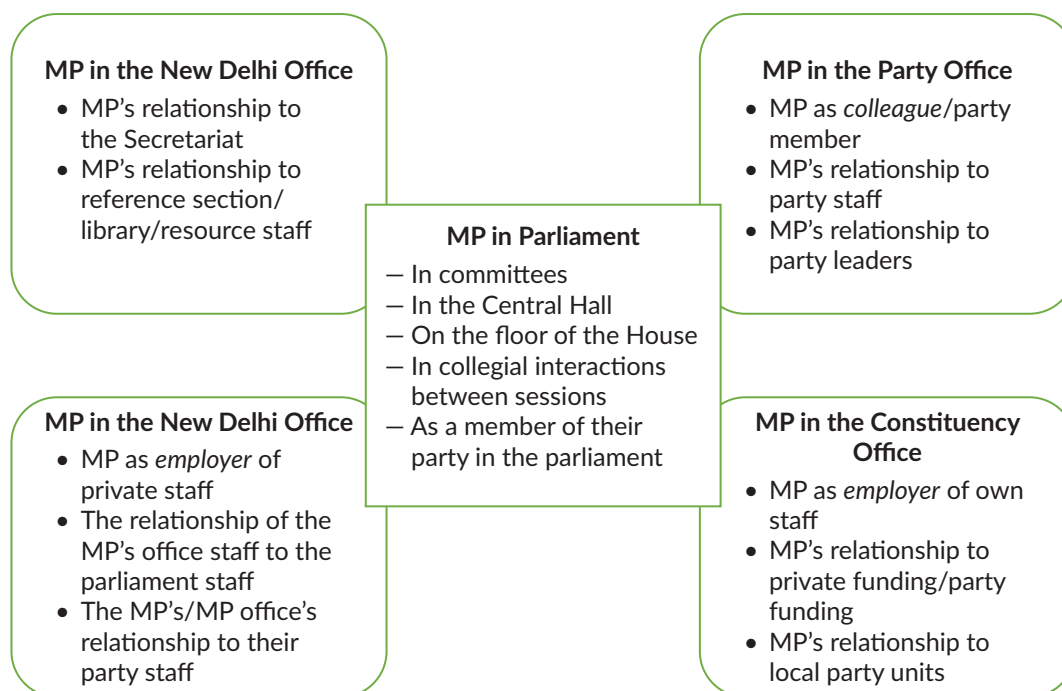
Figure 1. Mapping the parliamentary workplaces of an MP in India.

of complexities that must be taken account in formulating context-specific gender-sensitive and "diversity sensitive" (Childs, 2016) reforms in parliaments (see Figure 1).

We therefore must consider what the boundaries of the parliamentary workplace are. The parliamentary workplace is dynamic and plural; its boundaries are porous. In India, MPs are provided with allowances for staff and personnel in their MP flats and offices in New Delhi, but can also choose to hire personal staff directly from their own resources. Additionally, MPs, especially MPs from the Lok Sabha who are directly elected, maintain privately funded constituency offices. In practical terms, the MP's workplace in India extends not just to their office spaces in New Delhi, but to their constituency offices across the country and indeed their homes, where they also meet their constituents, journalists, lobbyists, and researchers (interview with former All Indian Trinamool Congress MP 2, April 22, 2023; see also Crewe & Sarra, 2021; Rai & Spary, 2019). Given gendered patterns of party leadership, these resources are unequally distributed, affecting the work of MPs—women and men—differently. How we understand the boundaries of the parliamentary workplace would be reflected in how we design gender-based and intersectional reforms, as well as who we hold accountable for them. Additionally, MPs are colleagues in party offices, within chambers of parliamentary committees, in common spaces like the erstwhile Indian parliament building's Central Hall, as well as on the House floor, but the registers of collegiality (and therefore the grammar of the workplace) are different on each work-stage (see Figure 1). Each of these spaces is gendered: as we discuss below with reference to debates and disruptions in the "frontstage" parliamentary workplace.

If debating is an important frontstage aspect of the MP's work in parliament, then it would be pertinent to ask how this can be made more equally accessible to both women and men. Parliamentary rules in India frame selection to speak at "question hour" and some debates through a lottery system; however, the party leaders have a big say in the selection of speakers. A woman MP said:

The way the system works is [based on] certain instruments in the Parliament procedure which depends on your party leadership, how they decide and whether they'll give you an opportunity. There are a lot of political considerations also on who's going to say what. (Rai & Spary, 2019, p. 181)

So, political parties play a critical backstage role in who performs on the frontstage in parliamentary debates and will therefore need to be included in our understanding of how parliamentary workplace is made gender equal.

These complexities of the parliamentary space are also compounded when seen intersectionally: India, like most other countries, presents a complicated multilingual, multi-ethnic landscape, where is there also an in-built hierarchy of linguistic and socio-political hegemonies that shape the way Indian (also representative) politics plays out on the ground, in terms of voting demographics, constituency delimitations, etc. Within this landscape, women MPs negotiate multiple performances: With party whips and their political parties more broadly, they negotiate their legislative participation on the floor of the House on chosen policy issues and in parliamentary committees, but women also negotiate their legislative independence and autonomy when structuring their own offices (Rai & Spary, 2019). They also do this in the context of a federal state where linguistic and regional differences shape political and policy debates, as do religious and caste affiliation.

Let us consider the example of disruption in parliaments, which can be seen both literally as a "disruption of parliamentary business and procedure" and figuratively "as a disruption of the rules and norms embedded within the ritual of parliamentary debate" (Spary et al., 2014, p. 182). While disruptions are regarded as aberrant events, very often political parties organise these disruptions quite advisedly. This could be to provide raucous support to the members speaking in debates or to drown out the voice of the opposition (Lovenduski, 2014; Spary et al., 2014). In our study of the Indian parliament, we found that while some women MPs, many of whom came to parliament through participation in social movements, thrived on the chaos of disruptive acts in parliament and brought themselves to the notice of their party leaders, others, more middle-class women who were inducted in parliament without necessarily experiencing the hurly-burly of grassroots politics, felt obligated to participate in disruptive acts because of their party's strategy, but were uncomfortable in doing so (Rai & Spary, 2019, pp. 303–304; more on disruptions below). Political parties are then critical in reforming (or not) parliament as a workplace.

While it is important to work towards workplace reform for a gender-sensitive parliament, our approach reveals that institutional initiatives such as maternity benefits and protection from harassment in the workplace do not capture the whole picture; change towards a gender-sensitive parliament would need to take into account the exceptionality of parliament and its plural workplaces. This presents us with a potential to reimagine and expand the framework of the parliamentary workplace. Here, we ask: what would the application of the workplace framework across different parliaments look like? What relevance does the approach have in parliamentary contexts in the Global South? What, in particular, should we be mindful of, in translating global feminist institutional paradigms like the workplace framework to local contexts? We locate two broad approaches or lenses through which this translation of reform could be undertaken; both are complex. First, vernacularisation provides the "parliament as workplace" framework with necessary local contextualisation but does not always lead to the provincialisation of global frameworks, leaving "translations" in one direction—from the global to the local. The second lens, that of professionalisation,

drives towards a structured set of parliamentary workplace reforms but runs the risk of sanitising radical legislative politics.

In the following two sections, we look at both these lenses and the dilemmas they pose. We map how a critical approach to vernacularisation and professionalisation might help navigate these dilemmas in the context of the framing of parliament as a gendered workplace.

3. Gender-Sensitive Parliament: Tensions of Vernacularisation

We suggest that the Inter-Parliamentary Union's template needs to be vernacularised to understand parliaments in the majority of the world, like India's. Vernacularisation has largely been attached to understanding the circulation of institutional knowledges through the efforts of vernacularisers who "translate" global discourse, policy frameworks, and institutional strategies to "local" contexts (Levitt, 2020; Levitt & Merry, 2009). Levitt outlines vernacularisation through four lenses: positionality, which relates to the embeddedness of vernacularisers in the global cultural hierarchy; translation to make something comprehensible, appropriate, and useful; aspirations to make and remake meanings that can transform the "stuff" of policy and its assemblages; and, finally, "the ways in which these factors change over time as policies come to ground, are modified, and circulate once again" (Levitt, 2020, p. 756). Vernacularisation, in the context of democratic institutions, has also been used by anthropologists to understand how democratic values and practices legitimise political institutions or not—taking the focus away from institutions to "practices and ideas of the local people" (Michelutti, 2007, p. 639). The "vernacular," therefore, "provides a line of inquiry to understand the rise of popular politics in different parts of the world" (Michelutti, 2007, p. 639), challenging a single model of Western democracy and the irrelevance of postcolonial forms of democratic practice (Spencer, 2007).

However, as Madhok (2021) has noted, vernacularisation cannot simply be read as a process of translation and circulation of policies facilitated by some (often elite) vernacularisers, but as one that challenges epistemic hierarchies and demands a "non-linear, intersectional and materially informed thinking arising from historically and politically specific struggles around world-making taking place in different locations, while also accounting for the transnational power dynamics in which these operate" (p. 20). It is in this latter sense that we use the term in this article. Democracy or democratic institutions are not then pale imitations of Western ideas and institutional norms; rather framed by indigenous as well as colonial histories, local customs, ceremonies and rituals, and social hierarchies, they can generate various modes and political practices recognisable to and legitimate in the eyes of the local people/audience (Apter, 2006; Michelutti, 2007; Rai, 2010), while at the same time sedimenting deep inequalities through this process. Attending to both these aspects of the vernacular is important. Challenging settled understandings of institutional processes, actors, and performances in the specific contexts of intersectional inequalities, we discuss this below through a presentation of disruptions in/of parliament.

Critical vernacularisation, then, allows us to contextualise the global expectations from a gender-sensitive parliament in relation to structural and institutional barriers on the ground. Second, it allows us to complicate and pluralise the "workplaces" within a parliament. A critical vernacularisation approach therefore helps us ask different questions arising from our study of the Indian parliament as a workplace. These questions emerge from studying a long, gendered history of parliament in postcolonial India, the changing political

landscape of the country, and its institutional functioning. A vernacularisation approach also addresses some gaps in the "parliament as workplace" literature. Our contention is that vernacularisation can challenge the hierarchies of epistemic relations between scholars working within the Western traditions and those that are not. This is not to reify "culture" or traditions, both of which are contested and often problematic concepts; rather, it is to understand the changing political processes of democratic translations of institutional workings, the discourses that surround these, the contradictions that emerge in doing so, and how these affect the development of concepts, modalities, and practices in both directions.

The bureaucratic and structural demands of ideal workplace reform in a gender-sensitive parliament would include, for example, maternity benefits and parental leave (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017), and protection from workplace harassment on the basis of gender. There is a continuing legal debate on the extent to which Indian MPs (and members of state legislative assemblies) are considered to be "public servants" ("SC dismisses plea," 2019; Upadhyay & Singhvi, 2018). While legislative representatives in India are understood as public servants under the definition provided by the Prevention of Corruption Act of 1988 as the court has reiterated through benchmark cases like *P. V. Narsimha Rao v. State (Cbi/Spe)* (1998), there is still an on-going debate on the legal categorisation of an MP's "work." Dismissing recent petitions filed with it, the Supreme Court of India has stated that being an MP is not a "full-time" employment in India (Upadhyay & Singhvi, 2018). A petition sought to ban MPs from practising as lawyers (advocates) while holding seats in the Indian parliament, but the Government of India submitted that MPs serve their constituencies as elected members, not as employees of the government. While the contents of the petition are less significant to this discussion, it does pertain directly to the question at hand: If MPs are not employees, then rights and protections guaranteed to employees of organisations under Indian laws also do not cover them. This points to the exceptionality of parliaments as workplaces and needs to be considered if we wish to change rules and laws to protect those who work within parliament.

Critical vernacularisation thus points us towards the need to map the entanglement of many workplaces and many types of employers and employees/public servants, and the relations among them that make up the parliamentary workspace, when contextualising reform within specific institutional set-ups. But more importantly, critical vernacularisation would require us to account for not just the legal particularities of the MP's position, but also crucially, for the normative discourse surrounding becoming an MP in Indian representative politics. In our interviews with current and former MPs as well as members of state legislative assemblies in India, the narrative of politics as "not a job but a form of social service" recurs (interview with All Indian Trinamool Congress MP 1, September 13, 2022; Bharatiya Janata Party MP 1, August 29, 2022; Indian National Congress MP 1, April 19, 2023; see also Rai & Spary, 2019). The trope of service/vocation is a deeply gendered one and aligns with the place of many women in the home. While women MPs use this term to create more political space for themselves (Rai & Spary, 2019), this also affects their place in parliament and party as leaders (Rai & Spary, 2019). What political negotiations in terms of shifting performances of representation does this require from Indian MPs—women MPs in particular—who interact with demands for gender-equal reforms in parliaments? This concern aligns further with the larger, gendered political culture in India, where significant female political leaders are referred to in public and popular discourse with monikers of familial endearment (and implied entitlement)—just as West Bengal's Chief Minister (and erstwhile MP) Mamata Banerjee is known as "*didi*" (elder sister), Dalit political leader and erstwhile Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, is known as "*Behen ji*" (respected sister), the late Jayalalitha, once Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, was known as "*Amma*" (mother; Ray Chaudhury, 2022,

p. 946), and Sumitra Mahajan, who was one of the longest-serving woman MPs in India and an erstwhile Speaker of the Lok Sabha, is known as "*Tai*" (older sister in Marathi; Chadha, 2018; see also Banerjee, 2022). The politics of familial culture in South Asia implicates these monikers in expectations of care and service on the one hand (Ray Chaudhury, 2022, p. 957), and, on the other, it also produces a public political space for women politicians to function in familial relational terms. A critical vernacular lens into the Indian parliamentary workplace would allow us to move beyond simply locating the extent to which institutional reforms can be brought about, and towards unpacking the nuanced, gendered implications of language that encompasses relational modes of public "work" for the Indian woman parliamentarian. This would expand the ambit of the workplace framework—for example, by bringing in the language the media uses to describe the work and place of MPs—and its use in legislative studies.

4. Between Professionalisation and Privileges: Rethinking the Parliamentary Workplace

The "parliament as workplace" framework indicates normative reform pushing in the direction of a more "professional" parliament. In translating the "parliamentary workplace" approach from academic theorising into practice, feminist institutionalist practitioners have to turn to modes of professionalisation (Childs, 2016). But what work does conceptualising professionalisation do for understanding parliament as a workplace? The professionalisation of an MP's position within a workplace might make us examine issues such as parliamentary attendance, speaking in debates, and putting forward parliamentary motions and bills. In translating global norms of institutional reform, professionalisation would allow us to focus on improving the workings of existing institutions such as parliamentary committees or the speaker's office to function in a gender-sensitive way. Professionalisation, of course, has a value for institutions.

In the Indian parliament, the conduct of MPs in relation to parliamentary matters is governed by the Ethics Committee and the parliamentary Rules of Procedure. The key actors mediating MPs' immunities, privileges, and their conduct are the speaker in the Lok Sabha and the chairperson in the Rajya Sabha. The current ruling Hindu right-wing majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party government in India has attempted in recent years to curb the speech of several political leaders in the opposition, both inside and outside the parliament (Sahu, 2023). In one of the key instances of such curbing in the last year, Rahul Gandhi, one of the chief voices in the opposition, was disqualified from the Lok Sabha (and subsequently reinstated following a Supreme Court order) on an arguably dubious charge of defamation brought for a speech made outside the parliament ("Rahul Gandhi disqualified," 2023). In 2023, Mahua Moitra, a woman MP noted for her vocal opposition to the ruling government in parliamentary debates, was expelled from the parliament after a perfunctory Ethics Committee investigation into allegations of Moitra allowing third-party benefactors access to her parliament accounts to pose questions in the Lok Sabha on her behalf. She alleged that the questioning by the Ethics Committee was sexist and derogatory ("Ethics panel report," 2023). In recent years, the Indian parliament has faced controversies regarding the usage of rules of "unparliamentary conduct" to expunge the speeches of opposition MPs who have spoken about corruption charges on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, with its Lok Sabha speaker, Om Birla, claiming that such disruption "erodes democracy" ("Unparliamentary conduct, undesirable words," 2023). All this would easily come under the ambit of reform through professionalisation—where the entanglements between the ruling party in government and parliamentary institutions would be made more transparent, robust, and gender-sensitive. However, professionalisation is a Janus-faced concept.

Below, using four particular aspects of parliamentary politics, we discuss how professionalisation can also lead to institutionalising deeply gendered norms, vocabularies, and performances.

4.1. Immunity/Impunity

While it is ostensibly necessary for a more gender-sensitive parliament with structures of redress built into it, in democracies like India where there have been increasing fears of backslides and institutional weakening (Varshney, 2022), increased technocracy in parliamentary workspaces brings in a looming danger of co-option. MPs in the Indian parliament, like most parliaments, enjoy immunity from prosecution for utterances within the parliament, as well as sanctuary from criminal prosecution while they are within parliamentary premises (Constitution of India, 1950, Article 105). However, in some countries like Germany, for example, members of the Bundestag (akin to the Lower House or the Lok Sabha in India) enjoy legislative immunity for utterances inside the parliament, but not for anything said that may be construed as a defamatory utterance (Deutscher Bundestag, n.d., p. 3). This exception is not guaranteed in India. Parliamentary immunity in India (extended also to state legislatures and assemblies) has often meant impunity not only for misogynist and sexist remarks (Amnesty International UK, 2020; Rai & Spary, 2019, 2022), but also for making remarks that would be considered incendiary speech against religious and ethnic groups outside the parliament. In 2023, Bharatiya Janata Party MP Ramesh Bidhuri's action within the House was brought under the investigation of the Committee of Privileges after he called Danish Ali, a Muslim MP, a "'mullah terrorist,' 'pimp' and 'katwa,' a slur used for circumcised Muslims" ("Ramesh Bidhuri skips appearing," 2023) but faced little to no punitive consequences. This tension between immunity and impunity is increasingly a debate across global legislatures (Kwaw, 2021). The professionalisation of parliaments would seemingly redress this and create a more equal workplace environment, but as the instances of curbing the voices of the opposition cited above show, uncritical professionalisation could run the risk of allowing further democratic decline.

4.2. Women's Reservation

Similarly, professionalisation of parliaments, if not adequately vernacularised, could run the risk of de-democratisation of parliaments. Take this example: In September 2023, the Indian parliament passed a legislation, after nearly three decades of debate and political deadlocks, mandating that one-third of seats at the parliament and state assemblies will be reserved for women. The passing of this legislation presents an opportunity to assess how an increased representation of women in parliament might be generative of debate and potential reform to make the Indian parliament a more gender-sensitive institution, which then may be professionalised. However, both the process of introducing and passing this historic legislation—"shrouded in secrecy" till the last moment, as an MP argued in her speech during the legislative debate (CNBC-TV18, 2023)—and the details of its planned implementation, after an indeterminate time, cast doubt on the current government's gender awareness and on gender equality in Indian politics and in the Indian parliament more broadly. As we have argued elsewhere (see Banerjee & Rai, 2023), to expand women's membership of parliament and at the same time weaken the institution itself is problematic. Also, contradictory is the gendered approach taken here—on the one hand, eventually expanding the representation of women in parliament, but also taking it so non-seriously as an issue that no consultation with women's groups, women MPs, or opposition parties was deemed necessary. This Act became a purely performative gesture in the Hinduised choreography of opening the new parliament building (see Banerjee & Rai, 2023).

4.3. Training

Vernacularising professionalisation would require critical interrogation of existing legislative "training" systems in specific parliaments. In India, for example, it would necessitate a critical analysis of the system of professionalisation set up within the Indian parliament, i.e., the secretariat, and within it, the Parliamentary Research and Training Institute for Democracies (PRIDE), and their relationship with both MPs and political parties. The PRIDE, earlier known as the Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training, comes under the purview of the Lok Sabha secretariat, and carries out training and capacity-building programmes on "parliamentary processes and procedures" that cater to bureaucrats (at both national and state levels), for officers of the Lok Sabha secretariat themselves, and also for newly elected members of (state) legislative assemblies and MPs ("Pride newsletter second edition," 2021, p. 3). PRIDE boasts of the training programmes it hosts for MPs and officials from parliamentary secretariats and ministries from various countries ("Pride newsletter second edition," 2021) and positions the Indian parliament as a case for global emulation. However, there are no structured programmes under PRIDE for gender-sensitivity in parliamentary proceedings. Following our mapping of workstages within the parliamentary workplace (see Figure 1), the secretariat and the MPs function not just in plural workplaces within the parliament, but are enmeshed with each other in complex, dynamic ways. In our narrative interviews with parliamentarians, a woman MP noted a critical difference between working as an MP on the House floor and within parliamentary committee chambers:

> When you are in the committee you have the support of bureaucrats...when they are on your side you can, according to your needs, manage them, in order to facilitate policy implementation at the district level, at the block level....When you step out of the committee and into the floor as a parliamentarian, the bureaucrats don't listen to you. (interview with former Bahujan Samaj Party MP 1, August 19, 2022)

A critical assessment of such professionalisation measures would allow a mapping of overlapping, plural parliamentary workplaces, and necessitate conversations on the relationship between MPs, different political parties, and the parliament secretariat.

4.4. Disruptions

The boundaries of professionalism are translated differently in different parliamentary cultures. Similar to the overarching parliamentary workplace paradigm, moves towards professionalisation also come with ideal institutional imaginations of order. Overlapping with our arguments on vernacularisation, therefore, any efforts at professionalising the parliament to be more gender-sensitive and equal would need to consider the democratic power of disruptions and protests in the parliament (and the complexities of inter and intra-party collaborations that play a role in them; Rai & Spary, 2022; Spary et al., 2014). As non-elite groups increase in representation in parliament, the norms of performance in debates, in committees, and around the parliamentary spaces change over time (Rai, 2015). If the parliamentary workplace paradigm remains tied to rigid norms of behaviour attached to professionalisation, we run the risk of creating binaries of representative and unrepresentative parliaments. Systems of rules and procedures in parliaments might be used instrumentally to mask or push back against critiques of the hollowing out of the powers of parliaments to hold governments democratically accountable. For example, the rhetoric of "disruptive behaviour" was

instrumentalised against 141 opposition MPs protesting against the Bharatiya Janata Party government as a reason to suspend them during the Winter Session in 2022 ("Parliament winter session," 2023).

A "performance and politics" lens to study the practices in the Indian parliament can allow us to engage with the democratic power of disruptions and protests differently. An uncritical approach to professionalisation might lead to depoliticising gender-sensitive institutional reforms of the parliamentary workplace, for example, disciplining all parliamentary disruptive performances; a critical engagement with professionalisation, however, allows us to see these moments as an acknowledgement of different modes of communication of non-elite MPs (Spary & Garimella, 2013). More importantly, it allows us to map the representative expectations from MPs and the claims they make by visibilising, embodying, and performing their protest within the parliament (Spary et al., 2014) as a democratic workstage and workplace. Professionalisation of parliaments towards becoming more intersectionally gender-sensitive institutions is thus important. Feminist institutionalist practitioners/scholars therefore need to be wary of an uncritical institutional push towards the professionalisation of parliaments which could run the risk of executive co-option.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to build on the "parliament as a workplace" literature and tried to expand its remit by introducing the concepts of critical vernacularisation and professionalisation by methodologically deploying PPF. This has allowed us to open up the debate by showing the entanglements between the front- and backstages of parliament, particularly the role of political parties.

Our purpose in writing this article is not to deny the importance of the workplace framework; undoubtedly, reform of the parliamentary workday, provision of creches, implementation of legal penalties for sexual harassment, and gender-sensitive trainings are crucial for a sustainable parliamentary infrastructure. Rather, we wish to explore how this framework can be used in the context of this exceptional representative institution. We argue that this exceptionality needs to be celebrated as well as regulated and reformed. This consideration, therefore, of parliaments as workplaces, through critical approaches and the challenges they present, allows us to complicate what is not provincialised and what is vernacularised, as the discourse of "gender-sensitive parliaments," articulated in "other" Global North contexts becomes globalised through international institutions such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union. It helps us ask to what extent global norms and frameworks that are dominated by the Global North discourses can be translated into specific contexts, and what we would need to consider in order to effectively vernacularise practices.

We suggest that gender reforms in parliaments as workspaces should thus take into consideration, first, the institutional DNA that makes up particular parliaments, and, second, how institutions function (messily) in practice, where the arbitrary boundaries of workplaces do not hold neatly. This perspective is central to long-term, sustainable reforms to make parliaments gender-sensitive workplaces. Gender-sensitivity in the parliamentary workplace, thus, cannot be seen or designed for reform in isolation from the complex dynamics of the heterogeneous workstages that make up the parliament. Thinking more broadly and deeply about the framing of the "workplace" as a performative, plural space, and bringing more attention to the "workplace" in the "gender-equal parliamentary workplace reform" discourse would therefore allow us to frame effective reforms in these workplace cultures which govern not just the election of women MPs but

the long-term sustainability of women's participation in the Indian parliament (Rai & Spary, 2019). While we have explored this with the Indian example here, we suggest that a similar critical exercise across different legislative contexts would render useful comparative maps of parliamentary workplaces globally. It also allows for the potential in the "parliamentary workplace" not just as a strategic paradigm to adopt for immediate goals of reform such as gender-sensitive rights and benefits for MPs, but also as a potent metaphor that can enrich scholarly enquiries for wider use in legislative studies.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data used in this article contains excerpts from transcripts of anonymised fieldwork interviews, translated into English. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, and in accordance with the informed consent granted by the participants, data supporting this study cannot be made available.

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COGITATIO

ARTICLE

Gender Sensitizing Parliaments: Reflections on Becoming a Feminist Academic Critical Actor

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Abstract

Informed by my secondment to the UK Parliament in 2015–2016, and the production and reception of *The Good Parliament* report—which offered a blueprint for a diversity-sensitive House of Commons—this article reflects on my experiences becoming a feminist academic critical actor. This new type of critical actor extends the conceptualization first developed by Childs and Krook (2006, 2008). A distinctiveness vis. Chappell and Mackay's (2021) concept of the "feminist critical friend" is also drawn: In addition to researching institutional change and supporting others in their reform work, the feminist academic critical actor is essential to instigate and institute institutional change. In this, the feminist academic critical actor is engaged in quotidian persuasion work and is both the agent as well as the analyst of research, critically reflecting on the dynamics and actors of institutional status, change, and resistance, including their own acts, in situ and after. In making the case for the feminist academic critical actor, the academic is recognized as doing something different, begging important questions of responsibility and accountability, and the opportunities and costs of engaging in such acts, particularly for minoritized and/or precarious academics. In the latter part of the article, I sketch out some of the dilemmas located in the questioning of my authority and legitimacy, and concerning the harm that I faced as a relatively privileged aspirant feminist academic critical actor, acting to rework the highly masculinized institution that is the UK House of Commons.

Keywords

critical actor; feminist academic critical actor; feminist institutionalism; gender-sensitive parliaments; House of Commons

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1. Introduction

In 2015, having been involved behind the scenes working towards the successful establishment of a Women and Equalities Committee (Childs, 2022), I invited myself into the UK House of Commons. I inhabited the House from September of that year until February, drafting a 40,000-word report. *The Good Parliament* (TGP) made 43 top-line recommendations that, if all implemented, the report claimed, would overturn the Commons diversity insensitivities and transform the House into a more representative, inclusive, and effective institution. Delayed by the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, TGP was formally launched by the then Speaker, the Rt Hon John Bercow, in July 2016. After the summer parliamentary recess, the Speaker established a new parliamentary body, the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion (hereafter the Reference Group) to lead on TGP's agenda—a recommendation that he had accepted prior to publication, and was hence not included in the report itself. Chaired by the Speaker, and comprised of women and men MPs from across the House, the Reference Group benefitted symbolically and substantively from Bercow's leadership and Office resources. I was appointed its adviser. The Reference Group met regularly while the House was sitting for the next two years, until autumn 2018.

At the time of my arrival in the Commons, I was already aware the of gender-sensitive parliament (GSP) publications of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2011, 2012). Their large, colourful map documenting the percentages of women parliamentarians across the globe had been a staple on my office wall for years. I was confident too, as I sought funding for my parliamentary secondment, that the IPU's global reputation would enhance efforts to effect gender-sensitizing reforms. The UK Parliament is one of its 180 institutional members, with IPU staff based on the Parliamentary Estate working closely with MPs. As the list below details, the IPU's GSP framework has seven dimensions (IPU, n.d.):

1. Promotes and achieves equality in numbers of women and men across all its bodies and internal structures.
2. Develops a gender equality policy framework suited to its own national parliamentary context.
3. Mainstreams gender equality throughout all its work (via gender mainstreaming and or via a women's caucus or gender equality committee, to ensure that parliamentary outputs are analyzed from a gender perspective).
4. Fosters an internal culture that respects women's rights, promotes gender equality, and responds to the needs and realities of MPs—men and women—to balance work and family responsibilities.
5. Acknowledges and builds on the contributions made by its male members who pursue and advocate for gender equality.
6. Encourages political parties to take a proactive role in the promotion and achievements of gender equality.
7. Equips its parliamentary staff with the capacity and resources to promote gender equality, actively encourages the recruitment and retention of women to senior positions, and ensures that gender equality is mainstreamed throughout the work of the parliamentary administration.

I would quickly narrow these down to three: (a) equality of participation; (b) parliamentary infrastructure; and (c) Commons culture. Reasons of resources and expertise meant I would neither address the administrative side of the House in any meaningful fashion, and for reasons of resources once again, but also because it is the

government rather than the legislature that leads on these, nor would I attend to the quality of the Commons' outputs—laws and policies—from a gender equality perspective.

In another revision from the IPU's framework, I adopted a diversity-sensitive parliament (DSP) approach, rather than a GSP one. In TGP I defended this move in the following way, stressing the importance of working intersectionally: "Women are not the only group under-represented in politics and Parliament...these other exclusions should also be acknowledged and rectified" (Childs, 2016; see also Childs & Palmieri, 2023, 2020). I did not document that my decision was triggered by the hostility I faced when I first presented the GSP "terms" of my secondment to the House of Commons Commission. The Commission is the Commons' body formally tasked with institutional leadership (https://committees. parliament.uk/committee/348/house-of-commons-commission). In a meeting where all but the two lay members were men, I witnessed what I came to call the "hear gender, see women, think discrimination against men and special treatment for women" critique. In short, having listened to my presentation, the goal of gender-sensitizing the House was seemingly perceived to threaten these men MPs' preferences and interests. I left the room highly concerned that Commission MPs—and their fellow travellers—would be unsympathetic if not openly antagonistic to my report's recommendations.

Jumping forward a couple of years, a review undertaken as part of the UK university "research excellence" assessment established that more than 40 percent of TGP's recommendations had since been implemented in part or in full. Although this is only a snapshot of top-line effects, Table 1 details that implemented reforms included new formal rules (e.g., a new Standing Order established "proxy voting" for MPs on baby leave, under maternity/paternity leave recommendation no. 12), the establishment of new institutions (the Women and Equalities Committee was made permanent and the Reference Group was established), and interventions engendering cultural change (e.g., the publication of data regarding committee witness diversity). This magnitude of impact was unexpected. I had, to be sure, in TGP talked up the period 2016–2018 as particularly "felicitous" for GSP/DSP reform, but in so speaking, I was in large measure seeking to construct the contemporary moment in that way. In specifying any effects TGP might have, more substantively speaking, I was if anything rather circumspect. As presented to my university, my "impact claims" were three-fold: (a) to more fully *document* key gender insensitive parliamentary practices, structures, and norms; (b) to *develop a reform agenda*—a set of implementable proposals to redress these; and (c) to *instigate a process* that will ultimately lead to the achievement of a "gender-sensitive" parliament at Westminster. TGP's impact achievement plan was, accordingly and explicitly oriented to "creating and developing relationships, networks, processes, and strategies for reform," rather than quantifying substantive outputs (Childs, 2016; Lovenduski, 2017).

2. The Feminist Academic Critical Actor

Originally, the concept of critical actor refers to elected representatives:

> Who initiate policy proposals on their own and who often—but not necessarily—embolden others to take steps *to promote policies for women*, regardless of the number of female representatives present in a particular institution. (Childs & Krook, 2008, p. 734, emphasis added).

Table 1. TGP's implemented recommendations.

Parliamentary actor	DSP dimension	Total no.	TGP recommendation (numbered)
The Speaker	Culture	4	#1 (behaviour concord) #3 (children/lobbies) #5 (IPU GSP audit) infant feeding (not numbered)
Reference Group	Participation; infrastructure; culture	5	#6 (MPs' work) #12 (maternity/paternity leave) #13 (creche) #14 (DSC witness diversity) #16 (dress code)
The Commission	Participation; culture	4	#17 (acknowledgement of the Reference Group by the Commission) #18 (website) #19 (introduction to being an MP programme) #20 (double-sided Parliamentary pass)
Leader of the House	Infrastructure	1	#25 (establishment of the Women and Equalities Committee)
Liaison Committee	Infrastructure/culture	1	#28 (DSC diversity data)
Procedure Committee	Infrastructure/culture	1	#29 (DSP nomenclature)
Works of Art Committee	Infrastructure/culture	2	#40 (10-Year Dead artwork rule) #41 (diverse artwork)

Note: DSC stands for Departmental Select Committee.

The advancement of the concept of critical actor reflected mine and Mona Lena Krook's criticism of the widely circulating theory of critical mass, or what we would term "critical mass theory." In this, women-elected representatives are presented as the agents of feminist change, or rather they become so when they reach a particular percentage, usually taken to be 30 percent. Crudely, and problematically, such accounts abstract women representatives from their wider, local contexts, and render them "all of a kind" who, at the magic number, work together unfettered to successfully realize shared feminist ends. The new concept of critical actors took inspiration from Dahlerup's (1988) discussion of critical acts and holds that regardless of the number or percentage of women in a parliament, some elected representatives—probably but not necessarily women—seek to act for women because they have a lower threshold. Whilst it is true that the language of new and/or feminist institutionalism was not drawn upon as we defined the concept, attention was never merely on what the individual critical actor does, inattentive to analytic considerations of her context, or indeed those that she may work with (see Chappell & Mackay, 2017, p. 34; Childs, 2024; Palmieri, 2019). Contra those who regard the critical actor concept as over-privileging individual agency (Annesley & Gains, 2010; Rai & Spary, 2019; Waylen, 2017), our conceptualization challenges such assumptions inherent within critical mass theory. The emphasis in our definition on critical actors' motivation, their initiating role, and women-friendly goals, coupled with the qualification that their effects are neither guaranteed nor unidirectional but rather mediated and contextualized, and at times contested and resisted, undergirds the qualification that the "shape and impact" of critical actors' acts are "not absolute" (Childs & Krook, 2006).

It was only as I spent more time in the UK House of Commons identifying its GSP/DSP insensitivities that I began to think of myself as *becoming* some kind of critical actor. Like other researchers, whether political

science or anthropological (Crewe, 2005, 2015; Geddes, 2020; Malley, 2011; Miller, 2021), I was present to document and better understand its ways of working. But I was also present—and was explicitly funded—to design and deliver quantifiable change. Extending the concept of critical actors beyond elected representatives is by no means unprecedented—politics and gender as well as policy scholars have long identified change actors operating outwith parliaments. Going by different names, including but not limited to policy entrepreneurs, these actors from civil society and academia collaborate with politicians and civil servants to bring about feminist change (see, for example, Freedman, 2017; Holli, 2008; Mackay, 2008; Sawer, 2016; Woodward, 2004). That said, proposing the concept of the feminist academic critical actor might be considered more demanding, begging many questions, inter alia: What does the feminist academic have to do and/or achieve to be considered a feminist academic critical actor? How are they different from other academics who have long since supported political party activists, women members of parliaments, and femocrats? (Chappell & Mackay, 2021; Childs & Dahlerup, 2018; Skjeie et al., 2017). What is—or should be—their relationship with others within the political institution, women's civil society outside, and the wider feminist academic community?

In the first instance, the feminist academic critical actor shares with other researchers involved in engagement and impact activities, acceptance of the feminist imperative to change as well as study the world; they similarly eschew claims that social science should or can be objective (Campbell & Childs, 2013; Stoker, 2013); and they produce new research oriented towards and/or supportive of change. Like the original critical actor, the feminist academic one need not be a woman. In advancing the new concept, I also happily place the feminist academic critical actor against the backdrop of the category of "feminist critical friend" (FCF), presented by Chappell and Mackay (2021). The FCF is derived from the study of *feminist advocates* within various institutions *by scholars* "interested in understanding where and when particular strategies" for change succeed (Chappell & Mackay, 2021, p. 2, emphasis added); they are "engaged" with, and "entangled" in, the work of an organization's feminist advocates' change efforts (Chappell & Mackay, 2021). Most similar to Chappell and Mackay's (2021) gender expert/advocate who is "embedded in institutional arenas for a period of time to *actively and explicitly promote* reform agendas" (p. 5, emphasis added), the feminist academic critical actor is at times importantly quite different. There is, I posit, too much about their "change" work that cannot be contained by the verb "to promote," which is constitutive of their gender expert/advocate definition:

> I read Chappell and Mackay's use of the forward slash linking gender expertise and advocacy as limiting the FCF's role as a change actor. This is not just about how much advocacy work the gender expert/advocate does. If the FCF is critical for Chappell and Mackay in the sense of offering a critique of the institutional arena within which insiders seek to act, and of the masculinized formal and informal institutions therein, the feminist academic critical actor is (at least potentially) critical in the sense of being *essential to driving and at times leading institutional change*. (Childs, 2024)

In other words, the feminist academic critical actor not only acts directly within a political arena, they *instigate*—"'bring about' changes" by incitement or persuasion"(Instigate, n.d.)—and *institute*—"set up, establish…introduce" (Institute, n.d.)—feminist change. Thus, even as she researches what is going on and as she supports others, oftentimes working in close collaboration with them, the feminist academic critical actor is also devising and driving reforms. To be clear, I am not proposing the feminist academic critical actor as some kind of heroic lone wolf(ess). Holding that the feminist academic critical actor at time leads on

institutional change is not the same thing as saying that they have—or must—act alone. Nor then, am I downplaying the collective knowledge she brings with her, and the others (individuals and networks) with whom she works, whether academic, GSP international organization, civil society, and/or parliamentary actors. And, of course, whether any individual merits the status of the feminist academic critical actor (rather than an aspirant one) can only be answered by empirically documenting how they acted to rework an organization or political arena. In their own account, it is important that the feminist academic critical actor verifies what they did and with happened as a consequence of their acts thereafter (see Childs, 2024; Erikson, 2017, p. 8).

The labour of the feminist academic critical actor is two-fold: (a) to produce new research and (b) undertake persuasion work. New research is inevitable: How else will the feminist academic critical actor identify a parliament's gender/diversity insensitivities and determine the necessary and appropriate reforms? But even when engaged in thinking about a new design, the feminist academic critical actor is attentive to the associated building work or, more modestly, the institutional refashioning that will be needed (Celis & Childs, 2020) making the parliament do what it would otherwise not have done (Ahmed, 2012). In both aspects, the feminist academic critical actor's twin pre-fixes are constitutive not merely descriptive.

The feminist academic critical actor's prior research expertise positions them to better read their parliament. Adopting an ethnographic approach enables them to better interpret "what happens, by and to whom, and with what effects" (Childs, 2024). Deploying new institutionally grounded knowledge, more and different parts of the parliament's rules, norms, and practices—and how they relate to and interact with each other—as well as embedded encounters with others, become visible and thereby interpretable, and thus (potentially) fertile for gender-sensitive transformation. In her quotidian persuasion work, the feminist academic critical actor sets out to exploit (proto)opportunities within the parliament by working with those who are themselves seeking gender-sensitive parliamentary change and those who may not be so predisposed but who nonetheless occupy positions of power from which change can be enacted. In all this, the feminist academic critical actor embraces Feminist Institutionalism's insights regarding the "limitations" of what she can achieve, and the likely "compromises" needed (Chappell, 2006; Mackay, 2021, p. 77). There will undoubtedly be some feminist "red lines" that they cannot cross, but accepting incremental, micro-level change against the macro and meso backdrop (Chappell & Mackay, 2021, p. 17; Mackay et al., 2010, p. 582), helps reconcile the feminist academic critical actor to the *feminist art of the possible*. The feminist academic critical actor's persuasion work must be reactive and responsive as well as proactive. *En cours de route*—as Karen Celis (personal communication) would put it—they must be alert to prompt and exploit new opportunities, relationships, and networks, and be ready to counter expected or unforeseen contestation, resistance, and/or backlash.

In acting to bring about institutional change, the feminist academic critical actor is both an agent as well as an analyst. The two roles are concurrent rather than consecutive, even if at a later stage a more profound retrospective, critical self-reflection might also be produced. Put differently, as the feminist critical actor thinks on her feet in the here and now, they would do well to specify how they might act in a particular context, attentive to what response might be incited (whether supportive, agnostic, or critical), and to work out how they can best act, and with whom, to institute and instigate gender sensitizing outcomes. This is not simply that as an analyst, the feminist academic critical actor knows more, or differently, because of their new research; or even that they can deploy their new knowledge to devise technically appropriate and politically viable GSP

recommendations. Rather, and as I illustrate in the next section, the feminist academic critical actor's twin roles undergird the development of strategies and tactics that work with and around (i.e., meet, subvert, or negate) particular institutional actor's preferences and interests towards the goal of GSP reform.

3. The Feminist Academic Critical Actor's "Hard Labour"

As already indicated above concerning the House of Commons Commission, the aspirant feminist academic critical actor enters into a highly masculinized political arena when they access the Palace of Westminster, one historically established for, by, and in the interests of elite men (Lovenduski, 2005; Malley, 2011; Puwar, 2004). They can be under no illusion that their impactful labour will be hard (Mackay, 2020). My time in the House was most definitely experienced as physically exhausting but also demanding concerning intellectual deftness and personal fortitude. This might be true of any ethnographic study of the Commons—or indeed embedded research in other institutions—but it was exacerbated by the persuasion work I was tasked with undertaking as an aspirant feminist academic critical actor:

> As a woman and as a feminist, I would routinely face direct challenges from MPs in the form of the gendered questioning of my *authority* (you have no formal status in the House), *legitimacy* (you are but an academic), and *knowledge* (you only think you know how the House works and what it—MPs and staff—need)....I was told that I did not and could not know it [The House]....If I was not "of" the institution, nor was I "of" the people. I was biased with the wrong informants and friends. And if they were mistaken or wrong, then my critique could only be incorrect too. (Childs, 2024, emphasis added)

Authority, *legitimacy*, and *knowledge* are key terms. Precisely because their goal is to convince others of the relevance, salience, validity, and timeliness of her critique and prescription, the feminist academic critical actor's interventions need to be compelling to those who can implement change. Leaving aside, here, the question of how and on what basis, the feminist academic critical actor gains access, she will need thereafter to maintain acceptance of her presence (Fenno, 1978). Arguably more important still, they must be regarded as someone meriting listening to. The credibility of either (her) academic knowledge in general, or feminist academic knowledge in particular, cannot simply be assumed. As the above quote lays bare, I was frequently regarded as biased by my own or women MPs' (leftist) feminist blinkers, and/or under the political control of the Speaker, as well as too abstracted from the "realities" of the House. This was especially the case for Conservatives and particularly Conservative men MPs. At other times MPs also queried my right to speak "my truth" to them. Clerks and officials were in broad terms much more sympathetic to academic enquiry, perhaps because of my prior relationships with senior ones, who considered me "their feminist." That is not to say that clerks and officials were not reticent about my radicalism per se, nor how this might negatively affect the take-up of any of my more "considered," as they would put it, recommendations. There was an ongoing preference for TGP to include fewer recommendations.

To try to mediate indifferent and hostile reactions, I followed what is widely considered wise and accepted fieldwork practices, such as dressing appropriately for the organization and adopting its terms and ways of operating. In this, I voiced my longstanding, non-partisan, formal, and informal links to the House, tried to work with the norms of the House, and appealed to MPs' prejudices and individual and institutional egos. For example, I would talk of the UK Parliament as a global role model parliament, and stress the MPs' role in advancing this. I would also periodically present my "professorial knowledge" as distinct in form from, and of

lesser value in, understanding the everyday practices of the House. In respect of the former, I did this knowing that Westminster has much to learn from other places, and in respect of the latter, I did so knowing that I was risking others and not necessarily any less worrying responses and reactions. For example, cultivating "ethnographic naiveté" or deploying flattery (Atkinson, 2017, p. 105; Crewe, 2015) risks reproducing notions of women's lesser knowledge. Naiveté might, if interpreted as flirting, prompt inappropriate responses. And, in presenting myself as a "reasonable" feminist, I inadvertently implied a distinction between the good and bad feminist. Such a distinction might arguably feed a narrative that could subsequently be used to restrict the entry of the "less reasonable" feminist in the future, a state of affairs that I would not want to see. Here, then, are examples of the everyday, consequential "choices" that the feminist academic critical actor might face, which must be weighed against any more immediate benefits. Ultimately, she can and should be held accountable for "how" she acts.

The "what" of her institutional change agenda is essential too. With my access to the Commons informally secured via a senior Clerk of the House—I had longstanding relationships with senior clerks and was known to the then Speaker of the House, having been an official adviser to the 2010 Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation—it was to my university and funder whom I was formally accountable; neither had any interest in the nature of my recommendations, only that I was impactful. In developing my new plan for the House of Commons, I was committed to drafting only technically appropriate and politically viable recommendations; feminist institutionalism convinced me to rank the incremental over the fantastical. At the same time, and in productive tension, were what I considered non-negotiable, feminist red lines. One reading of *Designing and Building Feminist Institutions* is, accordingly, a defence of TGP's feminist content (Childs, 2024). In this, I acknowledge my gyroscopic tendencies (Mansbridge, 2003), even as I state my debts to (a) extant politics and gender research, (b) parliamentary research that addresses women's political representation, (c) the insights of my two Commons advisory groups—a parliamentarian one and a "clerks and officials" one—(d) input from the Parliament's workplace equality networks, not least Parligender, (e) a meeting with representatives from select women's/parliamentary civil society groups, and (f) my feminist in residence and secret clerk. All of these acted as sources of information, technical and political, as well as constituting sites of accountability. Practising feminist parliamentary ethnography—bringing politics and gender analysis to the research site and the data—I was moreover able to identify and develop stronger and new relationships, and opportunities that I could nurture, as well as better recognizing the actors and institutional constraints that needed to be overcome.

Over and above their capacity to persuade parliamentary actors to take up their recommendations, and maybe for that very reason, the feminist academic critical actor will almost certainly have to accept that her recommendations may end up at some distance from what other feminists seek, especially perhaps, those outside of the institution. She will need in such circumstances a compelling rationale that justifies her "take" on the parliament. To provide one example: It was because I felt an obligation to women in the House—and to women who might one day seek to enter parliament—that I withstood a senior man MP warning me off drafting an MPs' maternity leave recommendation. I was appalled that he considered that I would be creating a reputational "scandal" for the House by raising the issue, or that I would damage the arrangements individual women might be able to secure from their party managers, the Whips. He seemed to me more concerned about what consequences any bespoke baby leave would have for MPs who are ill than for the mother and to a lesser extent the father MP. Despite all that he said, I would not be deterred; my responsibilities to women MPs, pregnancy anti-discrimination activists, and women generally, was

paramount. Plus, I had acquired sufficient knowledge of women MPs' experiences to be sure of my critique and of what might be put in place to enable MPs to better balance early parenthood with their parliamentary work.

The idea of *the feminist art of the possible* alludes to the recognition that the feminist academic critical actor operates in less than hospitable habitats and faces political actors with oppositional preferences and privileged positions to protect. The critical MPs on the Commission had, therefore, been correct in perceiving that many GSP reforms would involve a rebalancing of gender power within the House, and do so at some cost of those currently, albeit unfairly, benefitting from the masculinized Commons. When it came to determining, and moving the levers of change, I frequently had to rely upon critical male allies—not least the Speaker himself, because of his institutional significance. Once again there are consequences to these choices, symbolic and substantive: for example, privileging powerful men as change actors may require a dilution of reform, and/or give rise to an over-emphasis on their agency, thereby downplaying women's actions prior to or alongside (Erikson, 2017, pp. 153–154; Mackay, 2021; Myerson & Scully, 1995).

As she seeks to persuade, the feminist academic critical actor should not be surprised if she is scarred by her experiences. Even a working relationship with institutionally privileged men may not protect them. Counteractions operate on a continuum of gendered political violence (Krook, 2020; Piscopo, 2016), negatively affecting some more than others, on the usual structural grounds, of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, (young) age, and caring responsibilities. My personal and professional privileges notwithstanding, on two occasions I was subject to tabloid copy, querying once again my authority and legitimacy, and with immediate and longer lasting affective effects. The hangover effects remained, reducing interaction with the media for fear of misrepresentation and reputational and/or social media backlash. For those contemplating becoming a feminist academic critical actor, and despite any academic riches associated with impactful research, as we enter the public realm in this (new) role, we are making ourselves present in prominent places, increasing the likelihood of being subject to an array of harms.

4. Conclusion

The character of the feminist academic critical actor emerged as I came to realize I could position myself to lead on institutional re-gendering in the UK House of Commons; by refracting through my feminist/academic specs my prior knowledge harvested from the collective works of politics and gender scholars (predominantly, political representation, parties and parliaments, and feminist institutionalist scholarship) and new ethnographically-grounded experiences acquired through observing and experiencing Westminster. In seeking to act critically, I would, over and above producing institutionally compatible G/DSP reforms, need to persuade many different political actors that my new design, *The Good Parliament*, should be adopted. I am unable to fully support my claim to constitute a feminist academic critical actor in this article—that involves a book-length treatment. It is also ultimately for others to determine. In *Designing and Building Feminist Institutions* (Childs, 2024), I systematically reconstruct the (extra)institutional contexts and conditions within which I acted, comprehensively document my re-gendering efforts, critically examine collaborations with other actors, internal and external to the House, and analyse what I did, and the gendered power struggles I negotiated (Celis & Lovenduski, 2018). I trust, however, that I have here provided sufficient to make a *prima facie* case for the feminist academic critical actor. It might be that other feminists undertaking impactful research in (political) institutions will, in what I have written, recognize their

labour as that of the feminist academic critical actor. If that is the case, then their self-reflective experiences will over time flesh out, if not revise, this understanding of the feminist academic critical actors' agential and analytic roles, prompting yet greater appreciation of when and how, and by whom, institutions can be ripened in a feminist direction.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

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ARTICLE

Insiders and Outsiders: Feminists in the Academy Influencing Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Change

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Abstract

While the idea of a gender-sensitive parliament is over 20 years old (Childs & Palmieri, 2023), institutional reforms in the name of gender equality have been slow to materialise around the world. Where change has occurred, it appears to have been catalysed by a limited range of—sometimes confluent—factors including the public airing of allegations of sexual misconduct in the #MeToo era, the increasing salience of gender-sensitive parliament international norms, and the role of feminists in the academy. Celis and Childs (2020) identify feminist academic critical actors as those who rather than simply researching parliamentary change, explicitly undertake institutional (re)design and (re)building work (see also Childs, 2024). In this article, we uncover the work undertaken by feminists in an Australian academic institution to support the 2021 independent inquiry of the Australian Human Rights Commission into Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces. This work—undertaken by the authors as both insiders and outsiders—informed the analysis and recommendations in the Australian Human Rights Commission's report, and since its launch, has also kept pressure on the various bodies entrusted with implementing gender-sensitive changes. We argue that feminists in the academy are uniquely positioned to navigate insider and outsider roles in support of gender-sensitive parliamentary reform.

Keywords

academia; critical actors; feminism; gender equality; #MeToo; parliamentary reform

1. Introduction

From federation in 1901 until 2021, the Australian parliament implemented a select number of gender-sensitive reforms. Among these were the introduction of proxy voting for "nursing mothers" in 2008, a childcare centre which opened in the same year, changes to the (long) hours of business in the House of Representatives, and the relaxation of rules that disallowed "strangers" (such as babies and toddlers) on the floor of both parliamentary chambers. These are not insignificant reforms, but each one took years of behind-the-scenes advocacy and, importantly, was pursued as a singular change (Palmieri, 2010; Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024). However, a code of conduct or any kind of mechanism to handle complaints of bullying and harassment allegations is notably absent from reforms in those 120 years.

Since 2022, a comprehensive suite of reforms has been steadily implemented, based on the recommendations of a report entitled *Set the Standard* (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2021). The independent inquiry that produced the report was catalysed by a public allegation of rape in a ministerial office. It received submissions from over 1,700 individuals and organisations, many of which reported incidents of serious misconduct. The ensuing report presented Australian political leaders with a substantial "case for change" and a set of measures that would establish a safer, more respectful workplace across the entire parliamentary ecosystem. By early 2024, the Australian parliament had established a Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce to oversee the implementation of the report's 28 recommendations; passed legislative changes to the working conditions of political staff; created an independent complaints body; changed the sitting hours and parliamentary schedule to improve wellbeing, balance and flexibility; commissioned committee reports into everyday respect in the chambers; established a new independent HR body for parliamentarians and staff; and drafted new behaviour standards and codes. In 2024, work on developing an Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission continues. By any measure, this is an impressive, wholescale set of gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms.

In this article, we are interested in exploring the specific strategies employed by feminists in the academy in support of this wholescale parliamentary reform in Australia. We do this by presenting our own role in the advocacy and design of specific changes, most notably towards the code of conduct, changes to the working conditions of ministerial staff, and the operation of the parliamentary chambers. We are motivated, in part, by a desire to contribute to the increasing body of literature that seeks to understand the catalysts behind gender-sensitive procedural reforms in parliament (Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Erikson & Verge, 2022a; Palmieri & Baker, 2022; Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024). While this literature has canvassed the role of international norms and the articulation of aspirational standards and practice, as well as the role of critical individuals and acts (or "shocks") within the institution of parliament, less work has focused on the role of outsiders to the parliamentary process, and specifically, the work of feminists in academic institutions. In making this point, we seek to extend the foundational work of Celis and Childs (2020; see also Childs, 2024) that explicitly aims to better understand the opportunities and constraints pertaining to the feminist academic critical actor when they are in a position to support (or drive) parliamentary reform, and the institution building that allows that action (or activism).

We ask two questions: What strategies do feminists in the academy employ in supporting parliamentary reform, and how do academic institutions facilitate that work? Responding to these, we build on Childs's work to develop a typology for policy change influenced by feminists in the academy. We identify and detail

four strategies that were ultimately successful in translating knowledge to practice: (a) convening international and national gender experts and learning from those experiences to design context-appropriate solutions, (b) acting as an intermediary between knowledge holders who wish to remain anonymous and knowledge seekers, (c) working within the change instigating institution (in this case, the AHRC), and finally, (d) publicly monitoring and engaging with parliament's responses to proposed recommendations. By uncovering these strategies, we suggest that feminist academic critical actors are uniquely placed to navigate reform processes as both insiders and outsiders: As insiders, we can be drawn in to do the conceptual work of designing credible policy recommendations, even where that may not have a visible output for our everyday job; as outsiders, we can use our positions in academia to amplify the voices of those individuals who prefer to remain anonymous, usually without jeopardising our institutional reputation.

2. An Auto-Ethnographic Exploration of Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Change

In 2022, Maria publicly presented, for the first time, her work behind the scenes to reform the working conditions of Australian political staff. In the audience, Sonia was struck by three specific aspects of this work: It had hitherto been invisible, it was more than "academic research," and it was driven by a strong feminist ethic of care for the victims of harassment and assault in the parliamentary environment. This public presentation instigated a series of private conversations among us: We knew we had all contributed, individually and collectively, to a major reform process in the Australian parliament (culminating in the implementation of the recommendations made in the *Set the Standard* report). This reform process is outlined in Table 1. We asked: To what extent did our various university roles support that work? To what extent did our university require us to undertake this work as insiders (and therefore invisibly) or as outsiders (and therefore publicly)? If careful navigation of insider and outsider roles was crucial to our ultimate impact on the process, under what conditions did the university allow us to do both?

In answering these questions, we take these initial conversations at the end of 2022 and the continued discussions in 2023 that led to the writing of this article as a form of auto-ethnography (Adams et al., 2022). This is deeply reflective and reflexive research (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012), enabling a collective interrogation of past experiences with a view to informing future theory and practice. Topics of discussion included: our own positionality and past parliamentary and political experiences; the relationships within the policy and parliamentary ecosystem that we held in common and separately; the meaning and effectiveness of our insider and outsider roles, including in contrast to previous (failed) attempts at policy and procedural reform; and the purpose of our work, underpinned by a strong desire to see feminist, social justice outcomes. These discussions allowed us to interpret and critically examine our experience of supporting gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms in Australia. Mirroring the subject of our inquiry, we note that our research method also raises questions about "insiders" and "outsiders" (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). We are investigators studying ourselves (and therefore insiders), but also investigators seeking to contribute to wider debates (outsiders). We lay no claim to objectivity necessarily; indeed, we are conscious that research objectivity norms expect us to "smuggle our knowledge...into a discourse of science that fundamentally contains, and painfully undermines, the powerful knowledge of activist feminism" (Fine, 1994, pp. 13–14).

Our research focus is singular in two ways: It is a single case study of one parliament and of feminists from one university. Single-case studies are useful when they allow an intensive analysis of one unit (in this case,

Table 1. Timeline of Australian federal parliamentary reforms, 2020–2024.

2020	November:
	• Allegations of bullying by a minister aired in the *Four Corners* program "Inside the Canberra Bubble"

2021	February:
	• Former adviser Brittany Higgins alleges she was raped in a ministerial office
	• 24/7 support line created for those working in federal parliament
	March:
	• Government announces an Independent Review Into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces to be undertaken by AHRC
	• Women's March4Justice takes place across Australia
	June:
	• Interim complaints body established
	July:
	• Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL)/Australian Political Studies Association conference proposes a code of conduct
	September:
	• Sex Discrimination Act extended to parliamentarians and their staff
	November:
	• Inquiry report *Set the Standard* tabled in parliament, with 28 recommendations for reform

2022	February:
	• Parliament issues apology for the "unacceptable history" of bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault in its workplace
	• A cross-party cross-chamber leadership group created to steer the implementation of the recommendations, the Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce
	• A Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Standards created to develop codes of conduct for parliamentary workplaces
	July:
	• Changes to the sitting calendar and hours
	September:
	• Inquiries into everyday respect in the chambers
	October:
	• Review of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act

2023	February:
	• Three behaviour standards and codes endorsed by both houses of parliament
	October:
	• A new HR body for parliamentarians and staff begins, the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (an independent statutory agency headed by an independent CEO)
	• Members of Parliament (Staff) Act amended

2024	• Work underway to develop an Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission, planned for October

a parliament) and then, based on that intensive analysis, generate a collection of interpretative lessons which may inform a larger group of units. While the Australian parliament is not the only one to undertake wholescale gender-sensitive reform (see Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024), the process by which reforms were designed, implemented, and monitored has been atypical. There is much from which to learn. The singularity of our university base, however, is also noteworthy: We are all employed by the Australian National University (ANU). Maria and Sonia are academic faculty with research and teaching responsibilities, while Natalie is the chief operations officer of the GIWL. The ANU was also not the only academic institution from

which experts were sourced to contribute to the reform process. Feminists from universities in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane also contributed. It is not immaterial, however, that the ANU is based in the country's capital, not far from the national parliament. This proximity is further indicated in our longstanding association with the parliament. All three of us have held previous positions in parliament (as either ministerial advisers or parliamentary staff). As we show below, however, the establishment of a new institute for women's leadership at the ANU also proved an important differentiator from other universities in the country.

3. Feminists, Academic Institutions, and Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Change

For two decades, the norm of a gender-sensitive parliament has been increasingly socialised among a predominantly international community of parliaments. At the global level, good practices in gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms have been shared with national parliaments through research, resolutions, and plans of action. In essence, this normative framework encourages parliaments to have greater gender balance in their membership and leadership structures; stronger gender mainstreaming practices in their representational, legislative, and oversight work; and a gender-equal workplace culture that does not tolerate any form of sexism or otherwise discriminatory behaviour and language (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011).

As with other policy and procedural reforms, the conceptualisation and implementation of gender-sensitive parliamentary reform have benefitted from "a continuous interplay between academics and the wider gender-sensitive parliament practitioner community" (Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024, p. 224). While international development organisations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association initially conceptualised and commissioned this research, they subsequently relied on academics and researchers to translate norms onto the "floors of parliament." This has essentially led to a new sub-discipline of gender and politics research, evident in dedicated panels at conferences and special issues of academic journals (e.g., Erikson & Verge, 2022b). The growth in this field has also seen the publication of toolkits organised and funded through international organisations (for UN Women, see, e.g., Childs & Palmieri, 2020).

This "symbiosis" begs the question of why and how academics have been able to contribute to gender-sensitive parliamentary reform. Woodward (2003) originally pointed to the "identity-based" grounds on which feminists in academia found their voice in policy reform more broadly. As women (and usually as political scientists), academics have found an almost natural affinity with work that seeks to change the political institutions they study, to become more gender-sensitive, inclusive, and diverse. This rings true for us in many ways: We each identify as feminists, being women who are professionally and personally compelled to advocate for gender justice, specifically (but not exclusively) in relation to women's and other marginalised groups' increased and effective political participation and leadership.

With this policy affinity, academics became a trusted corner of Woodward's (2003, p. 77) "velvet triangles" of policy change, alongside feminist bureaucrats and organised voices in the women's movement. Yet, within these triangles, feminist academics were seen to work in ways that differentiated them from bureaucrats and activists. Holli (2008, p. 174) asked whether as researchers, feminist academics were "outside helpers or an integral part of the triangle." In fact, the insider/outsider status of feminist academics, or the ability

of these gender experts to be both contributors to gender equality change but also observers and analysts of that change, has become a defining feature of *how* they work (see also Childs, 2024). It is the ability to navigate *both* outsider and insider roles that distinguishes feminists in the academy from feminist bureaucrats (nominally insiders) and movement activists (nominally outsiders).

Following her secondment to Westminster in 2016, Childs has paid considerable attention to defining and defending the specific role of "feminist critical actors inside the academy" (see also Celis & Childs, 2020; Childs & Dahlerup, 2018). For Childs (2024, p. 5), "the feminist academic critical actor not only acts directly within a political arena, they *instigate*—'bring about' changes by incitement or persuasion—and *institute*—set up, establish…introduce—feminist change."

Using this definition and the idea that feminists in the academy carry out their reform work as both insiders and outsiders, we propose a typology of gender-sensitive parliamentary reform instigated and instituted by feminists in the academy. This typology (Table 2) outlines both the strategies employed to instigate and institute policy reform, as well as the mode of that activity; that is, whether a strategy is best employed as an insider, an outsider, or both. Between *instigating* and *instituting* policy reform is a spectrum of strategies that can be used by feminists in the academy. While these strategies may already be well known to the feminist policy community, we suggest that academics have particular abilities to draw attention to issues and promote reform ideas through conferences and media commentary. Their policy research also grants them respected expert status within the insider policy community. They can be influential if they choose to activate these opportunities at critical moments.

Table 2. The reform work of feminists in the academy.

Reform phase	Strategies	Activity mode	Examples
Instigating (or agenda-setting)	Strategy 1: Convening experts to design a code of conduct Strategy 2: Researching, listening to, and speaking for insiders	Outsider	Research, compiling good practice, media commentary, lobbying, bringing together feminist networks dedicated to reform
Instituting (or policy development)	Strategy 2: Researching, listening to, and speaking for insiders Strategy 3: Crafting context-appropriate policy options from the inside	Insider	Work on inquiries as consultants and meeting with key actors to craft solutions/recommendations, using evidence to build the case
Instituting (or implementation and monitoring)	Strategy 4: Monitoring, critiquing, and keeping policymakers accountable	Insider	Talking to implementers, critics, and key actors involved in decision-making and continuously persuading the decision-makers
		Outsider	Submissions, media commentary, testifying before committees, monitoring of progress, and providing external accountability

We make a small differentiation from Childs' work in that our typology includes the work of feminist actors who work within the academy but who are not academics. These feminists are both visible and invisible. They may not seek the public profile of an academic—they will rarely speak in the media, for example—but they are still passionate about the feminist outcomes they seek to achieve. Often with experience outside academia—including in the policy institutions in need of reform—"professional staff," as they are known at the ANU, have the time and capacity to organise complex events and to oversee and project manage research and policy collaborations to ensure they are translated from academic research to tangible and time-sensitive outcomes. Professional staff collaborate with other like-minded third-party groups such as civil society groups to extend the endorsements and authority of academic work.

4. An Independent Review of Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

Revelations of sexual harassment, misogyny, bullying, and even criminal behaviour between and among parliamentarians and political staff rocked Australia from 2020 to early 2021. Allegations of misconduct and sexual assault were widely covered in the media, most notably the case of former adviser Brittany Higgins who shared her experience in a televised interview with a prominent journalist on a commercial network in February 2021. These allegations sparked mass protests, with thousands of people across the nation calling for change. The huge public outcry was an unusual feature of Australia's reform trajectory (Sawer & Maley, 2024).

The conservative government of the day led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison was due to be tested at an election in 2022. In part as a reaction to a known "woman problem" (Johnson, 2021), Morrison asked the AHRC in March 2021 to investigate "the workplace culture" at Parliament House and to report in nine months.

The review, well-funded and conducted mostly online as a result of the lockdown restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, was widely consultative. In a survey of people currently working in the parliamentary workplace, the review found that 37% of respondents had been bullied at work and 33% had been sexually harassed (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 106). In 456 pages, *Set the Standard* made the case for 28 recommended changes, many premised on the link between gender equality and safety and wellbeing for all parliamentary workers.

The *opportunity* (see Chappell, 2000) afforded by this inquiry to instigate wholescale gender-sensitive (and diversity-sensitive) reform in the Australian parliament was not lost on us, and we each embraced the call to pursue changes we had previously tried to see implemented or that we felt were long overdue. Institutional resistance to gender equality reforms in the Australian parliament is perhaps better characterised as "passive," in the sense that it is perpetuated through inaction and non-decision, rather than "active," outright hostility (Waylen, 2014). For this reason, as had been demonstrated in other contexts, "policy failure" was unlikely to be overcome through "isolated efforts" (Verge, 2021, p. 191); as we demonstrate below, channelling our efforts through the AHRC process proved to be key to our success. We now outline the strategies by which we were able to effect change in 2021 and 2022, both in tandem with and following the AHRC's inquiry.

5. Strategy One: Convening Experts to Design a Code of Conduct

The GIWL at the Australian National University is a leading voice on parliamentary reform in Australia through a range of timely events, advocacy, research, and media engagement. The GIWL at the Australian National University was established in 2018 as a satellite unit to that established at King's College London by Hon. Julia Gillard AC, Australia's only woman prime minister. At both King's College and ANU, GIWL has been driven by three guiding principles: Its research aims to draw together existing findings and undertake new studies, its advocacy and engagement aim to bring together experts and stakeholders from across the world, and its practice translates research into evidence-based policy, practice, and training (GIWL, 2022).

In July 2021, GIWL partnered with the Australian Political Studies Association (whose contribution was led by Emerita Professor Marian Sawer) to bring together national and international experts to develop a model code of conduct for the Parliament of Australia at the Parliament as a Gendered Workplace: Towards a New Code of Conduct conference. Over two days, leading academics, politicians, and political staffers came together at the ANU to reflect on new research on gendered norms and practices in parliamentary institutions and to look at international best practices and consider how they could be adapted for the Australian context. The timing of the conference was critical, occurring in parallel to the AHRC inquiry, aiming to bring expertise to bear on the inquiry's recommendations to the government.

GIWL's contribution to the organisation of the conference was largely led by its non-academic Chief Operations Officer Natalie who nonetheless had her own extensive contacts. Natalie was driven by her former experience of working in ministerial offices and political campaigns, knowing the context of the dysfunctional workplace well, and desiring change.

The outcome of the July 2021 workshop was the development of a formal, co-authored submission to the AHRC's inquiry. This submission was endorsed by 21 academics and experts and included a model code of conduct, released publicly and promoted by the university. The submission argued that international best practices showed what might be done in Australia to mitigate the risk of bullying, sexual harassment, and misconduct in Australian political offices. It also highlighted limitations and what ought to be avoided. The codes of conduct later endorsed by the Australian parliament in February 2023 closely reflected the model code put forward by the GIWL/Australian Political Studies Association, with clear expectations around integrity, diversity, bullying, and harassment as well as an independent mechanism to deal with breaches of the code.

Natalie played a key outsider role, drawing together a wide range of experts and stakeholders to influence the outcome of the AHRC inquiry by producing a coordinated formal submission. As a non-academic, Natalie brought her experience of working as an "insider" across a range of relevant institutions, including as a media adviser working with journalists and in think tanks understanding how to drive public engagement and interest in an issue, as a ministerial policy adviser understanding decision-making in executive government as well as the central roles of lobbyists and stakeholders in supporting reforms, and as a public servant providing advice to government and understanding how government decisions are implemented. She had led major government reviews in the public sector, bringing together the contributions of disparate panels into a formal document able to be endorsed by a diverse group.

It is noteworthy that the GIWL/Australian Political Studies Association conference was the first time we three authors worked together. We were all involved in aspects of its organisation. Maria also presented her research (Maley, 2021b), and Sonia chaired a session and facilitated the workshop that drafted the proposed code of conduct. As outsiders, we used our research (including the compilation of good practices), feminist networks, and lobbying skills to set the agenda and instigate reform. In each other, we recognised a mutual desire to see change and a belief that, in this "high stakes" but potentially "fleeting moment," genuine change was possible.

As the institution that initially brought us all together, the role played by the GIWL at the Australian National University is significant. Previous research points to the importance of creating feminist organisations/units within universities (Verge, 2021). Being chaired by Australia's first—and to date only—woman and feminist-identifying prime minister meant GIWL had to navigate its political relationship with parliament. While non-partisan, GIWL is an explicitly feminist academic unit with a feminist purpose to change gender equality outcomes through research, advocacy, and practice. In this sense, it is not an "ivory tower" establishment; it seeks to achieve progressive, inclusive cultural change across multiple organisations. GIWL deliberately cultivates relationships with feminist organisations and stakeholders within and outside academia. Importantly, in organising the July 2021 conference, GIWL partnered with Australian Political Studies Association, not only for funding but also for academic legitimacy. As its chief operations officer, Natalie had both the level of experience and personal networks to facilitate this work and the authority to author and act quickly on the institute's behalf. GIWL has continued to use its feminist identity to publicly pursue gender equality change in the Australian context and around the region.

6. Strategy Two: Researching, Listening to, and Speaking for Insiders

After researching Australian political staff for many years, in 2020 Maria began tracking the movement of women into political and policy advising positions; by 2021, they occupied 40% of adviser roles and 30% of powerful chiefs of staff (see Maley, 2021a). However, Maria's work had not yet focused on the working conditions of women in political offices.

Then, in November 2020, former media adviser Rachelle Miller went public in the national broadcaster's *Four Corners* program "Inside the Canberra Bubble" about her sexual relationship with Minister Alan Tudge and the bullying she had experienced in ministers' offices. Tudge was a senior minister in the Morrison government. The program also alleged predatory behaviour towards women by another minister, Christian Porter, then attorney general in the Morrison government.

After the *Four Corners* program aired, a journalist rang Maria for a comment. The following week, Maria was contacted by a political staffer who had read her comment and wanted to tell her story. It was a story of serious bullying by her MP and her chief of staff, poor working conditions, psychological and career damage, lack of redress against abusive behaviour, and powerlessness. The staffer felt it was not safe to go to the media and she did not want to damage her party. She said she chose to tell Maria her story because, in her words, "you are an academic so you can change the world." In the febrile world of politics, female staffers were silenced by fear their complaints would be weaponised politically but trusted what they saw as an independent academic, with higher-order motivations. They also believed in academics' potential for influence, using their public voice.

After getting ethics approval, Maria interviewed the staffer, who then contacted colleagues and friends and said they could trust Maria. By early 2021, Maria had listened to many stories, sometimes sharing tears, acknowledging the trauma and anger that had been suppressed for years. For some, she was the first person who had listened and cared. Maria realised deep problems existed in all political parties, locked behind a wall of silence. At this point in early 2021, no moment of change was on the horizon. Feeling a sense of responsibility to now act for her informants, she decided to bring their voices into the public domain.

Drawing on these stories, Maria published eight op-eds between 2020 and 2022, five in leading newspapers and two in the online platform *The Conversation*. Each piece argued strongly for reform. One article, "Why Political Staffers Are Vulnerable to Sexual Misconduct—And Little Is Done to Stop It," was republished in 97 national, state, regional, and local newspapers across Australia in February 2021 and was discussed on ABC TV's *Insiders* program (one of Australia's most watched political news forums). In addition to radio and television interviews, Maria spoke with journalists around the world.

In this way, Maria acted as a bridge between staffers and the media, a safe conduit for them to speak out. Staffers wanted their stories to reach the public to bring about change. Journalists were desperate to interview staffers to humanise and understand lived experience but could not find people prepared to talk to them. As an academic, Maria could legitimately bring staffers' stories into the public domain, keeping their identities and their parties hidden, confident in the integrity of her research interactions. Maria also organised for three women to write first-person testimonies of what happened to them and she provided those testimonies anonymously to the news site *Crikey* (https://www.crikey.com.au), which published them as a three-part series called "Insiders' View." These "real stories" were powerful in building the case for change, provoking public anger and creating moral commitment amongst politicians.

Being an academic proved beneficial in this position of "information intermediary" between the political staffers and the media. Ethical issues could be navigated through well-established human ethics protocols required by the university, as well as Maria's personal commitment to always giving informants the opportunity to approve what was written about them (far more than a journalist will commit to). Maria's academic status created relationships of trust with both informants and the media: Informants trusted their confidentiality would be maintained, and journalists trusted the material was authentic. Maria was driven by her feminism but also by a weight of responsibility: They had entrusted her with their stories specifically to create change on their behalf.

This work was not unnoticed by the AHRC. In 2021, Maria was employed for six weeks as a consultant to the Review, drawing on her expertise in international practice in regulating and protecting political staff employment and on her deep knowledge of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act (the act under which political staff are employed in Australia). She also developed models for creating an independent human resources body for political staff, one of the most innovative recommendations of the AHRC report, which aims to prevent misconduct by professionalising the workplace (Sawer & Maley, 2024). Maria also wrote a submission to the inquiry. For this work, Maria is credited on the cover page of the *Set the Standard* report as having provided "expert advice and contributions to the Review."

Maria played the role of the outsider (amplifying critical voices, keeping issues on the public agenda, and advocating for change through the media) as well as an insider role (working closely with the AHRC behind

closed doors to develop options for reform). These roles enabled Maria to "instigate" and press for reform and also to design specific reforms ultimately included in the AHRC report, or in Childs' (2024) terms, to "institute reform."

7. Strategy Three: Crafting Context-Appropriate Policy Options From the Inside

In September 2021—two months before the AHRC was due to table its report—Sonia was seconded to the Commission to support the writing of two specific sections relating to diversity and inclusion and work environments that foster safety and well-being. A key reason Sonia was asked to work on the report was to feed international comparisons and good practices on gender-sensitive parliaments directly into the report. Sonia was known to have those comparisons ready to hand having made a career of researching and compiling these for international organisations (see Childs & Palmieri, 2023). Sonia also had a previous working relationship with the Review director; they had both worked for UN Women at the time of the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. The speed with which the secondment was offered and accepted (a matter of days, in fact) is explained by that relationship, as well as the relative flexibility of an academic role, enabling Sonia to pivot from what she was doing to work for the AHRC as it raced towards its November reporting deadline. While Sonia did have impending intensive teaching commitments, she argued the case with her supervisor that she could fit this work into her schedule.

For three weeks, Sonia became part of the team that produced the final report. This team worked remotely in the throes of lockdowns in Sydney and Canberra. They worked long and irregular hours, over and above normal working hours, many with families at home, evidenced in the occasional Zoom meeting attended by children. A secondment—even one as short as this—affords a feminist academic the ultimate "insider" role; in this case, Sonia became privy to the confidential transcripts of hundreds of interviews and focus group discussions with research participants conducted over the course of the inquiry, including senior parliamentarians and political and parliamentary officers. This access came with a signed confidentiality and non-disclosure agreement.

Sonia was tasked with helping the review team build a "case for change" by linking safety and well-being to gender equality. This was persuasion work, weaving together the international good practice of gender-sensitive parliament, national good practice in diversity targets and other measures, and analysing qualitative and quantitative evidence collected through the inquiry to make a credible argument for change. As noted, Sonia knew the international examples well, having written two reports on gender-sensitive parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011; OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2021). The domestic case was developed collaboratively with colleagues in the task force who had worked for Australian government agencies. Trawling through the confidential stories of assault and harassment, however, provided the most compelling evidence for change. Some of these stories were not new to Sonia given her prior experience as a parliamentary staffer; others were deeply disturbing. In contrast to Maria, Sonia was not able to share what she learned publicly; these stories and this evidence would never inform her own research. Rather, the analysis contributed to sections of the report relating to diversity and equality, as well as conduct in the parliamentary chambers, and the drafting of seven (of 28) recommendations. Like Maria, Sonia was credited on the cover page of the report as having provided "expert advice and contributions to the Review." Like Maria, Sonia was able to use her insider role to institute specific reforms—that is, design recommendations that were ultimately accepted by the parliament.

Sonia was driven by the opportunity to effect meaningful change in her own national context. As a parliamentary staffer in the early 2000s, Sonia had felt powerless to instigate gender-sensitive change; in fact, as an inquiry secretary to the House of Representatives Procedure Committee, she had drafted a report that decided *not* to implement proxy voting for women with infants and small children (this was later implemented as a consequence of a change in government, also described as an "exogenous shock"; see Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024).

8. Strategy Four: Monitoring, Critiquing, and Keeping Policymakers Accountable

Our individual and collective work did not end with the release of the *Set the Standard* report in November 2021. All of us engaged in extensive media outreach. Rather than having to pitch our ideas to news outlets, we were sought out to give interviews and write commentary. While Maria could publicly speak to insider accounts, Sonia kept her media commentary to the publicly released recommendations that were in her area of expertise.

Our continued engagement also involved social media monitoring and personal appearances at parliamentary committee hearings. Natalie created an advocacy campaign around the progress of recommendation implementation during the 2022 federal election campaign, tweeting about one of the 28 recommendations of the Review each day during the election campaign period and highlighting the need for an incoming government to commit to full implementation. As a result of this sustained advocacy, GIWL staff were invited to meet with the Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce responsible for oversight of the recommendations and the head of the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service. Maria also met with these actors and with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet staff, who were leading the implementation process.

We all appeared before the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Standards, established to develop a proposed code of conduct, following detailed, evidence-based, and well-received submissions to the committee. In addition, Maria made two submissions to the 2021 Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Review. Her recommendations were discussed in the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Review Report*. Maria wrote to the Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce critiquing the proposed amendments to the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act. She also briefed several other MPs and senators about the amendments which she argued did not go far enough and she provided them with evidence and arguments to use in their own critical submissions.

Further to her submission to the Parliamentary Standards Committee, Sonia made a submission to the House of Representatives Procedure Committee's inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of the *Set the Standard* report and subsequently appeared as a witness. The committee's report is largely an endorsement of her submission: The committee has accepted her key recommendation to amend the standing orders to outlaw sexist, racist, homophobic, and otherwise exclusionary language and determine procedures by which the chair would deal with breaches of the proposed rule.

Our insider and outsider work instructed reforms as they unfolded in the critical implementation phase. Writing formal submissions, testifying before committees, and engaging with the media aimed to influence from the outside and to hold reformers publicly accountable. Private consultations with key actors, including providing them with evidence to make their own arguments for new policies, procedures, and institutions, are examples of insider activity.

9. Reflections and Conclusions

This article provides a case study of the work of feminist critical actors in the academy, noting that not all were academic staff. Compared to other Westminster nations, Australia was slow to start reforming its federal parliamentary workplace in the wake of the #MeToo movement. However, when the reform process began in 2021, it unfolded rapidly and dramatically. We took the opportunities for influence that arose from an unprecedented period characterised by a strong momentum for change and a collective push to create new standards regimes. Our actions provide examples of feminist academic critical actors at work both from the outside and as insiders. We brought deep knowledge, personal experience, and a strong commitment to the reforms. In conclusion, we relate our experiences to the specific conditions afforded us by working in an academic institution.

9.1. Taking Advantage of a Critical Moment

Given our previous experiences in ministerial and parliamentary offices, we recognised that the critical moment created by events in early 2021 was unique and powerful. Following serious allegations of misconduct in the parliament, the government—perceived to have an electorally salient "woman problem" *in an election year*—tasked an external statutory authority, which it could not control, to run a comprehensive inquiry into parliamentary workplaces. As feminists in an academic institution, we seized the opportunity presented by this moment of change when existing power dynamics and arrangements—long considered gender insensitive, unequal, and unsafe—were destabilised and questioned. We took advantage of the flexibility of our workplace—and indeed, the additional "flexibility" of the pandemic's lockdowns—to accommodate this work.

9.2. Working in Multiple Modes: Insiders and Outsiders, Instigating and Instituting

In that critical moment, we used what we had—our voice, our research, our networks—to both instigate and institute specific changes, changes that we had known were needed for some time. We varied our mode of engagement at different stages of the reform process. In the early phases, our "outsider" work in the media helped to create and sustain momentum for reform, set the agenda, amplify voices, and allow staffers to be heard. Another outsider role was coordinating actors, expertise, and ideas in a conference to influence the inquiry process while it was underway. As outsiders, we corralled our feminist networks to identify solutions that would work in the Australian context and presented these as a collaborative effort to the inquiry. We can act in the moment, of course, because we have built credibility from our previous research, connections, and experience. We suggest it takes time and commitment over many years to be in the position to influence reform through the weight of our expertise and the value of our relationships. In the Australian case, instigating reforms took advantage of a critical moment, but was a long time in the making.

During the inquiry process, Maria and Sonia were formally drawn in as insiders, working closely with AHRC staff in crafting parts of the review report and its recommendations. This was instituting work in the sense that as insiders we were able to *design* reforms. In the implementation phase, when the report's recommendations were handed to various bodies to enact, we again played outsider roles. We reinforced the recommendations through our testimony and media work, aiming to persuade various policymakers of the merits of the reforms. We maintained pressure for real change to occur, at times by critiquing the work

of the implementers or presenting further advice on the workability of recommendations. For example, following Maria's strong critique of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Review recommendations, published in the media, independent MPs raised concerns. Following Sonia's public conversation with the Procedure Committee, the speaker's role in establishing an inclusive culture in the House of Representatives was further refined. Our sustained efforts in this phase also included being consulted privately by some inside actors when decisions were being made. In this phase, both as outsiders and insiders, our instituting work was focused on monitoring progress; we continued to critique policymakers and hold them to account as they implemented recommendations.

9.3. Feminist Policy Activism in Academia: Legitimate Work?

Feminists in academic institutions can be actors within the agenda-setting (instigating) and reform-design and monitoring (instituting) process precisely because they often can pivot from what they are working on to take advantage of the critical moment offered. When asked to convene a workshop, prepare background briefings, or take on a secondment, we do so because we understand and value the opportunity to make a difference. For each of us, there was something compelling in the opportunity to effect meaningful change at a time when there was appetite in the government and Australian society broadly.

However, we must be prepared to divert attention from our everyday work and invest significant resources. The opportunity provided by the status and role of the academic is to be able to devote time when it is needed and to take normative positions in public based on their expertise and be heard (and sometimes responded to by key actors). Sustained research and attention over time to the details of policy are required to have an authoritative understanding and to be an authoritative voice which is recognised by public servants, journalists, politicians, and other stakeholders. This authoritative voice can be used to not only advance ideas and influence agendas but also to hold reformers accountable for their work. Making critical commentary in the media from a position of expertise can be powerful.

Yet taking normative positions publicly can be risky for our academic, institutional, and personal reputations. We note that not all our academic colleagues agree that we should be taking such normative positions, but our feminist identity drives our motivation to support policy change. Being critical publicly can also be risky if we want to remain trusted interlocutors with key government actors and agencies, some of which fund our work.

The time and sustained effort involved in writing submissions, testifying before committees, and working on inquiries is time that is lost from academic publication writing and teaching—principal academic outputs. Submissions and other contributions to reform are generally not counted or valued in the output metrics which govern our employment. The impact of the work of feminist critical actors is rarely acknowledged as a form of achievement in academia. A downside of insider work (such as secondment to work on inquiry reports) is that the extent of influence of the feminist academic is not obvious to others, even when it may be extensive. In fact, sharing this work in academic circles is one of the few strategies we have to render visible that which has been invisible work.

Academic institutions—and in our case, the ANU and the GIWL—afford feminists important opportunities to engage with policy work which can be recognised through the professional lens of "impact." However, there are other kinds of recognition. In 2022, when major reforms were unfolding, the staffer who first contacted

Maria emailed to say that her decision to reach out to an academic was "the most powerful thing I have ever done—I achieved so much."

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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From Parliament to Party: The Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Group

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Abstract

Gender-sensitive parliaments are an emergent international norm. Research primarily focused on parliaments as gendered workplaces functioning with formal and informal rules and routines that either constrain or promote gender equality. We shift the focus to parliamentary groups and parties in public office as key actors in achieving a gender-sensitive parliament. We argue that they play a crucial role in many parliamentary systems and can actively contribute to gender-sensitive transformations. Building on the gender-sensitive parliament literature, we first explore the potential of parliamentary groups to improve parliamentary functioning across four aspects: representation, policy-making, engagement with societal interests, and groups as gender-sensitive workplaces. Secondly, we delve into the broader parliamentary and party contexts, recognizing how factors such as the diversity of parliamentary systems, organizational structures, parties in central office, and political dynamics shape parliamentary groups' room for manoeuvre. We conclude by calling for further empirical, but especially conceptual, research to develop intersectionality-sensitive parliaments which we suggest are crucial for dismantling existing power hierarchies based on social markers.

Keywords

gender equality; gender-sensitive parliaments; intersectionality; parliamentary faction; parliamentary group; party in public office

1. Introduction

Gender-sensitive parliaments are an emerging international norm mainly promoted by international organizations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Palmieri, 2011), the European Institute for Gender Equality

(EIGE, 2019), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (2001; Smith, 2022), or the OSCE (2021). The norm clearly transcends current tools for increasing women's representation (legislative or party quotas or reserved seats) whose implementation record is at best mixed (see, for instance, Meier et al., in press). Gender-sensitive parliaments aim to change the formal and informal dimensions to create an institution which "values and prioritizes gender equality as a social, economic, and political objective, and reorients and transforms their institutional culture, practice, and outputs towards those objectives" (Childs & Palmieri, 2023, p. 177).

We concentrate on the parliamentary group, what Katz and Mair (1993) call the party in public office, as a key gatekeeper in parliament. The party in public office, which can be the government or parliament, is one of the three faces of party organization Katz and Mair distinguish, the remaining two are constituted by the party on the ground (members or activists) and the party in central office (the national leadership of the party), which they underline as "organizationally distinct from the party in public office" (Katz & Mair, 1993, p. 594). We use the term parliamentary group in its common form, not only because it emphasizes the parliament (the context of this thematic issue) but also because it relates to the party in public office, that can function within a group of ideologically similar parties to increase their power within parliament. Other terms used are political group, political faction, and parliamentary faction. We acknowledge that our contribution mainly focuses on political systems where parliaments and political parties (within them) are meaningful political actors, but they can take many forms including both parliamentary or (semi-)presidential systems. Next to parliamentary groups, parliaments may also comprise other (in-)formal bodies, such as parliamentary committees, usually organized according to policy competencies/fields (such as a parliamentary committee on finances and the budget), or caucuses, which may (informally) gather MPs within, or across, parliamentary groups with shared interests (such as a women's caucus).

Most of the extant literature focuses on parliaments taking responsibility for achieving gender-sensitivity, rather than parliamentary groups as key actors (but see OSCE, 2021, p. 78). However, a gender-sensitive parliament needs to consider the crucial role of parliamentary groups as political actors—both in terms of parliamentary reform and in the reform of their own policies and practices. Indeed, from a gender equality perspective, a gender-sensitive parliamentary group would be valued as part of the parliament it would be organized in, and function along gender-sensitive lines. Instead of considering the contribution of parliamentary groups to creating gender-sensitive parliaments, we focus on the parliamentary groups themselves and explore how they could become gender-sensitive. Put differently, we explore what gender-sensitive parliamentary groups might look like within a broader parliamentary and party politics context. Depending on the issue, our focus on the parliamentary group can also involve the party in central office. For example, parliamentary groups coordinate their MPs' activities (e.g., chair[s]), liaise with the party in central office, and are supported by the administrative staff. While individual MPs can also contribute to gender-sensitivity, the focus of this contribution is on the parliamentary group, in which we take a dual perspective.

First, we contend that the sustainable transformation of a parliament to become gender-sensitive takes time and relies on committed parliamentary actors (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2024). Parliamentary groups are key actors and essential for core functions inside many parliaments inter-alia: legislation, deliberation, scrutiny, legitimation, and public engagement. Nevertheless, to achieve a gender-sensitive parliament, parliamentary groups would be required to act. The question is not only how they can make a parliament gender-sensitive,

but how they can contribute to it if they themselves are not gender-sensitive. The underlying assumption is that a fully gender-sensitive parliament would only be achievable if its parliamentary groups, as core actors, were gender-sensitive themselves. Thus, their gender-sensitivity is an essential condition for the realisation of a gender-sensitive parliament. Secondly, as Lombardo and Meier (2019) have pointed out, Pitkin's (1967) three dimensions of political representation—descriptive, substantive, and symbolic—are co-constitutive. This provides a more nuanced starting point to better understand the different dimensions of parliaments as gendered workplaces (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019). Hence, we start from literature on political representation, gender-sensitive parliaments, and party politics to survey which measures could be adapted by parliamentary groups to become more gender-sensitive. This explorative exercise contributes a more comprehensive engagement with core actors in those processes, which create and support gender-sensitive parliamentary transformations.

Accordingly, we first review the relevant literature to define four dimensions of a gender-sensitive parliamentary group: representation, policy-making, engagement with societal interests, and workplace issues. We elaborate on these dimensions in the following four sections, before focusing explicitly on gender-sensitive parliamentary groups in their broader parliamentary and party context, and concluding with our main findings and discussing further research avenues.

Before processing any further, we would like to underline that while the literature on gender-sensitive parliaments often focuses on gender as the social construction of men/women, we attempt to understand gender-sensitive through a more intersectional lens, reaching beyond a binary men/women construction, let alone a cisgender heteronormative definition. We also want to emphasize the importance of recognizing existing power hierarchies based on other social markers (such as race, ethnicity, disabilities, and religion) and how to overcome and eliminate them (Lombardo & Meier, 2022; Mügge et al., 2018).

2. Gender-Sensitive Parliaments in Review

Promoted by international organizations (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, 2001; EIGE, 2019; OSCE, 2021; Palmieri, 2011; Smith, 2022), the concept of gender-sensitive parliaments is an emerging international norm that, according to Palmieri and Baker (2022), requires "localizing." Gender-sensitive parliaments have been defined differently over time, with Childs and Palmieri (2023, p. 177) providing the most recent and comprehensive one: "A gender sensitive parliament values and prioritizes gender equality as a social, economic, and political objective, and reorients and transforms their institutional culture, practice, and outputs towards those objectives." Gender-sensitive parliaments' studies can be situated at the crossroads of research on state feminism (McBride & Mazur, 2010), gendering democracy and representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2022; Walby, 2009), and gender equality policy implementation (Celis & Mazur, 2012; Engeli & Mazur, 2018).

Extant research approaches parliaments as gendered workplaces that function with formal and informal parliamentary rules and routines that can either constrain or promote gender equality in their structures, decision-making, and policy-making (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Palmieri et al., 2021). Although there are differences in the order and specific content of gender-sensitive parliaments' dimensions, research has roughly defined the following four dimensions that we build upon in our explorations below (Childs, 2016, 2017; Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Palmieri et al., 2021; Smith, 2022):

1. Equal representation in parliaments covers descriptive representation and captures access to and representation within the parliament (e.g., parity, leadership positions, and committee membership). Overcoming a gender binary understanding of equality and addressing intersectional aspects, particularly along race, class, and age, is particularly crucial.

2. Gender equality in policy-making relates to substantive representation and comprises the main duties of parliaments: legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and ensuring policies address and reduce gender and intersectional inequalities.

3. Equal participation of societal interests involves both descriptive and substantive representation and encompasses connecting with the broader public, e.g., experts, movements, and civil society in hearings and through other participatory tools.

4. Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization speak largely to symbolic representation (i.e., discussion styles, rituals, language, room names, childcare facilities, art, etc.). It also steps into descriptive and substantive representation with, e.g., topics like parental leave, pregnancy, or the securing of a violence-free (working) environment.

Further extant parliamentary research provides rich analyses of strategies for political equality like gender mainstreaming (GM; OECD, 2023), the gendered impact of formal and informal rules from an institutionalist perspective (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016, 2019; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay, 2014), and, more recently, symbolic representation (Rai & Spary, 2019; Verge, 2022a, 2022b). In addition, Erikson and Verge (2022) demonstrate that parliaments, when conceptualized as workplaces, require a specific angle accounting for typical workplace-related issues like selection and recruitment policies; workplace rules, routines, and practices; matters related to the relation of work and care responsibilities; well-being requirements and policies; and codes of conduct (see Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

Gendered representation in politics and policies was often researched along Pitkin's (1967) classic distinction of descriptive (numerical share/physical presence), substantive (opportunities of interest articulation and responsiveness in policy processes), and symbolic (visual and spatial "standing for," including affects) representation (see, for instance, Krook, 2009; Palmieri, 2018; Paxton & Hughes, 2016). The three representative dimensions are mutually co-constitutive (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Montoya et al., 2022) and consequently also play out in gender-sensitive parliaments as illustrated in the succeeding sections. Much of the literature focuses on parliaments as institutions, reflecting on how to change their formal and informal dimensions, in contrast, we shift to the meso-level of parliamentary groups as key parliamentary actors in parliament, and as the main form of MP organization in many political systems.

Research on parties from a gender perspective is rich, particularly with a view to the recruitment, selection, and election of women and other underrepresented groups (see for overviews Krook & Norris, 2014; Reingold et al., 2021; Tolley, 2023). Recently, Verge (2020) engaged with party gender action plans and outlined how they can tackle gender inequalities more comprehensively through targeted intra-party measures, whereas following Childs (2013), Meier et al. (in press) explored the tensions between parity democracy and intra-party democracy. Moreover, scholars have investigated the role of women's caucuses and networks within parties and parliaments (i.e., cross-party or single-party) and explored their impact on women's substantive representation (see, for instance, Palmieri, 2020; Sawer, 2020, 2023).

While gendered party politics are extremely well researched, including partly parliamentary-related aspects like committee assignment (Baekgaard & Kjaer, 2012; Heath et al., 2005; Murray & Sénac, 2018) and substantive representation of diverse interests in policy-making (for instance, P. Allen, 2022; Brown, 2014), their role in creating a gender-sensitive parliament remains blurry. Yet, without exception, all publications on gender-sensitive parliaments strongly emphasize the need for cross-party support if lasting effects are to be secured (Childs, 2016; OSCE, 2021; Palmieri, 2011, 2020; Smith, 2022). If this is not possible for different reasons (e.g., some parties opposing gender equality), parties—as the remainder of this contribution illustrates—can still push for change within their own parliamentary groups. Based on Childs and Palmieri's (2023, p. 177) definition of a gender-sensitive parliament given earlier, we define a gender-sensitive parliamentary group as one that "values and prioritizes gender equality as a social, economic, and political objective, and reorients and transforms its party culture, practice, and outputs towards those objectives, thereby contributing to an overall gender-sensitive parliament." A gender-sensitive parliamentary group, thus brings the issue of gender-sensitivity down by one level. It focuses on the rules, procedures, functioning, norms, and values of the parliamentary group itself. The gender-sensitive parliament becomes a secondary—though not unimportant—goal at the higher level, to which a gender-sensitive parliamentary group contributes. More importantly, it emphasizes the responsibility of parliamentary groups insofar as it is not only the parliament as such, but the parliamentary groups within it, that have a responsibility to be and act gender-sensitive.

Parliamentary groups operate in broader institutional contexts shaped by national imprints which define their room for manoeuvre (e.g., parliamentary vs. presidential system; single-party vs. coalition government). Core aspects are the rules on how many MPs are needed for their formation, which resources (rooms, staff, and equipment) are allocated to them, and how parliamentary positions (e.g., leadership and committee/delegation membership) are distributed. Clearly, then, parliamentary groups participate in decision-making and policy-making parliamentary bodies. In many parliaments gender-focused parliamentary bodies exist in different forms like committees, cross-party women's networks, or women's caucus' (Sawer & Grace, 2016). Moreover, parliamentary groups represent, and aim to enforce, the interests of their party. Unquestionably, all these aspects shape parliamentary groups' ability to function effectively within the parliament, whether promoting gender-sensitive initiatives or other matters. In the following sections, we develop what parliamentary groups can do to become gender-sensitive.

3. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups and Representation

Gender-equal representation is often pursued through quotas (Dahlerup, 2006; Lang et al., 2023). Parity in itself, however, is insufficient, as asymmetries of power may persist in leadership positions and other crucial roles (Erikson & Verge, 2022; Lombardo & Meier, 2014). Parties largely used quotas to attract additional voter groups by broadening candidate profiles, yet intersectional aspects were often fulfilled by women, meaning the dominant group of non-immigrant (white) men remained stable (Mügge & Erzeel, 2016). Thus, while gender parity sustains equality of sorts, it maintains structural and systemic barriers to securing other marginalized groups' equal access to resources and decision-making power (Hughes, 2011; Krook & O'Brien, 2010; Lépinard & Rubio-Marín, 2018; Reingold et al., 2021). Comprehensive equal representation could activate positive side benefits, such as improving substantive representation through more diverse voices (P. Allen, 2022).

Arguably, parties could apply quotas to all parliamentary positions, but their parliamentary group can do much more to secure equal representation in parliament. For example, the monitoring and publishing of data on leadership and committee positions, rapporteurs, and speech time, allows for goal-setting and transparency about their commitment. Visible commitment may incentivize party engagement from women and marginalized groups and secure their intra-party success (Tolley, 2023), ultimately creating more diverse groups. Monitoring and engaged follow-up of measures propagated and initiated is crucial in this respect as it illustrates such a commitment.

Formal and informal institutions like social groups represented proportionally in functions, intra-party nomination procedures, stereotypical committee assignments, or leaderships linked to political seniority, steer representation in parliaments. Parliamentary groups in the European Parliament are illustrative: The Greens/European Free Alliance and the Left, with strong formal commitments, ensured gender-equal leadership; Social Democrats and the liberal Renew group—despite articulating their commitment—lacked formal rules, making gender equality negotiable, often disadvantaging women, while the conservative and right-wing groups rejected formal rules altogether and failed regarding gender-equal leadership (Kantola & Miller, 2022). Stereotypical committee assignments may result from self-selection (Baekgaard & Kjaer, 2012), distribution by group leaders (Heath et al., 2005), and cumulated subtle gender discrimination (Murray & Sénac, 2018). They impact women MPs' future careers because expertise in "hard politics" is what qualifies for high executive office (Kerevel & Rae Atkeson, 2013). Political seniority is an oft-used criterion for leadership, however, given the legacy of women's historical underrepresentation, tenure is characterized by massive gender gaps (Muriaas & Stavenes, 2023), a legacy that groups need to consider in position allocation.

Transparent formal nomination procedures in parliamentary group statutes prevent nepotism and "old boys networks" and, if parity is unachievable, then equip parliamentary groups with tools to ensure their women's share is mirrored in all functions. Several measures could ensure equal representation: operating with co-leadership, prioritizing the underrepresented gender in succession procedures, and installing a rotation system. Equal representation could also be secured by a lottery: If all candidates are considered equally competent in the matters to be dealt with, positions could simply be drawn by lot. This could result in an accidentally asymmetrical appointment, but it is nonetheless a neutral procedure. If not gender-balanced, parliamentary groups can also negotiate committee memberships and leadership positions with other "complementary" parliamentary groups (i.e., those with opposite gender composition) to reach parity, even if their own delegation is dominated by one sex to avoid gender segregation in committees.

Besides parity measures, parties can develop gender action plans (Verge, 2020) with obligations for their parliamentary group to tackle gender inequalities sustainably. They can, for instance, provide regular training on power hierarchies and gender dynamics for group members and staff, start a mentoring scheme to develop gender-sensitivity, make women and marginalized groups more visible, and support work–life balance (Verge, 2020, p. 241).

Improving the media visibility of women and marginalized MPs assists in countering stereotypes and increasing re-election chances, whilst increased numbers and visibility will most likely advance overall political engagement, "seeing women" indirectly improve their political participation and ambitions (Hinojosa & Caul Kittilson, 2020). The Cypriot parliament initiated an MP shadowing for young women, which

triggered their interest in politics (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024), and groups could provide similar schemes to grow women citizens' political engagement.

4. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups and Policy-Making

Translating gender-equal representation in policy-making into adequately addressing gender, requires additional efforts from parliamentary groups. Most parliaments established gender-focused parliamentary bodies (women's caucuses; committees) that facilitate the representation of women's interests, needs, and perspectives (Sawer, 2020, 2023; Sawer & Turner, 2016), although records of diversity-focused parliamentary bodies are still rare (see Childs, 2016; Palmieri, 2011). Various tools exist, like GM, gender impact assessments, and gender budgeting. GM promotes equality across all policy areas, gender impact assessments identify and prevent potentially negative effects for gender equality in policy measures, and gender budgeting targets budgets to avoid underfunding gender equality measures and sponsoring already dominant and advantaged groups.

Parliaments are rarely formally committed to GM (Ahrens, 2019; Huang, 2024; Sawer, 2020), and we know little about formal commitments by parties or their parliamentary groups to improve substantive representation. In one of the few case studies, Vyas-Doorgapersad (2015) analysed South African parties, and only one, the African National Congress, incorporated GM in its manifesto; other parties lacked any commitment to gender equality. GM and substantive representation can also be imprinted by religion, class, or caste. A recent collection of case studies on (semi-)democratic Asian countries highlights that the politicization of religion, patriarchal social attitudes, different core topics (economic development, combatting poverty), or party discipline makes it sometimes difficult for parliamentary groups to advance gender equality (Joshi & Echle, 2023). In the European Parliament, which already subscribed to GM in 2003, the parliamentary groups differ considerably regarding GM. The Greens/EFA adopted an internal GM plan that, for instance, ensures all parliamentary group briefings include a GM section, and all MEPs and staff receive GM training (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022). Along with a GM working group, the left adopted the formal structure of a GM working group and sees GM as a transversal policy issue; all other parliamentary groups lack formal commitment with the radical-right political groups, European Conservative Reformists and Identity & Democracy rejecting it outright (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022).

Next to GM, parliamentary groups can promote gender equality through their daily work by engaging in gender-focused parliamentary bodies and implementing gender action plans (Verge, 2020). Ideally, attention to gender issues should be the task of everyone, and thus, parliamentary groups should offer gender (mainstreaming) training for MPs and staff, as exemplified by the Greens/EFA parliamentary group in the European Parliament (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Kantola, 2022). If the parliamentary group is not yet equipped for such comprehensive processes, a women's caucus or gender equality body can function as a transitional body to ensure the parliamentary group's policy-making includes a gender perspective. Even if other parliamentary groups reject it, a parliamentary group implementing GM in its policy-making could impact the whole parliament. By inserting gender aspects, when negotiating with other parliamentary groups in committees and other bodies, legislation and other output would improve.

Parliamentary groups can revisit the distribution of speech time (given their parliamentary rules provide them with the necessary leeway) along gender and intersectional aspects as well as along policy fields. Who acts and

speaks for parliamentary groups (in plenary, committees, etc.) not only matters for the promotion of women's interests, but also for intersectional interests, differentiated along race, religion, or sexual orientation (Brown, 2014; Joshi & Echle, 2023; Reingold et al., 2021). Extant research on Sweden and other European countries demonstrated that: (a) women MPs generally receive less speech time than men MPs, (b) there is a gender bias in selecting MPs who take the floor on "hard" and "soft" policy issues, and (c) that the effect on speechmaking varies across parties (Bäck et al., 2014; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019). Parliamentary groups have the power to address each aspect.

Improved substantive representation is likely to impact descriptive representation, though its effect will be time-lapsed: If policy-making tackles gender and intersectional inequalities, then the most disadvantaged ought to receive more space to engage politically and socially. Eliminating the pay gap, providing high-quality childcare, education, and health, and improving public transport will erase many structural barriers by generating more resources for single mothers, for instance.

5. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups and Engagement With Societal Interests

Parliamentary groups can ensure a diversity of societal interests are appropriately addressed, by organizing their own (public) events and actively involving marginalized social groups instead of only standard stakeholders. Moreover, they can hold events on gender equality and intersectional issues in parliamentary spaces, thereby improving their visibility inside and outside parliament. By addressing the societal engagement aspect of their work, parliamentary groups can also provide feedback to their party and encourage initiatives that support "preferable descriptive representatives," which include MPs upholding close ties with diverse women's (or other) organizations (Celis & Childs, 2020).

Taking a more expansive view, parliaments often engage with broader society through hearings, events, expert commissions, and other forms of stakeholder engagement. Parliamentary groups can use these formal invitation rights to ensure that a diversity of voices are heard, including marginalized social groups (Palmieri, 2020). Given that parliaments operate with formal rules on who and how many can be invited, like-minded parliamentary groups could negotiate to offset asymmetries caused by parliamentary groups uninterested in promoting equality.

Parliamentary groups can also push for gender-equal participation when engaging with societal interests. Holli (2012), for example, showed that women's presence in committees alone did not ensure the number of women experts or attention to (gender) equality issues improved in Finland. Thus, parliamentary groups need to actively put women experts and equality issues forward, particularly when holding formal positions (e.g., committee chairs or secretaries). Including a broader diversity of experts and civil society requires goal-setting and monitoring by parliamentary groups, as a lack thereof will likely result in the continuance of the previous committee culture and the "usual suspects" (Holli, 2012, p. 361).

Besides committee procedures, parliamentary groups can steer their engagements with civil society and citizens within formal parliamentary rules. Most parliaments allow the creation of additional informal bodies, such as cross-party, single-party, or "friendship" groups on specific topics. In such groups, membership relies on interests and not the usual parliamentary proportional representation rule for parliamentary groups. Often, such groups can directly cooperate with civil society organizations, even to the extent of civil society organizations running the group secretariat (Landorff, 2023; Sawer & Turner, 2016).

Significantly, even groups run by only one parliamentary group can have a large effect on the representation of women and gender equality issues. The Status of Women Committee of the Australian Federal Parliamentary Labour Party, composed of women MPs of both chambers of the Australian parliament, has fostered women and equality issues since 1983 by scrutinizing and sensitizing ministers, requesting gender impact assessments and GM from ministers, making gender-sensitive ministers more visible, and conducting gender budgeting (Sawer & Turner, 2016, pp. 772–773). The government-oriented activities were closely intertwined with women's organizations and consulted them for expert advice (Sawer & Turner, 2016, pp. 773–774). Hence, parliamentary groups can improve gender-sensitive policy-making by institutionalizing engagement with representatives of diverse societal interests. If parliamentary groups cannot set up such informal parliamentary bodies, they can still initiate networking between civil society organizations for better intersectional policy promotion (Sawer & Turner, 2016).

6. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups as Workplaces

Parliamentary groups are a microcosm of parliamentary workplaces, and are, by definition, gendered. Hence, accessible infrastructure and supportive work organization are the keys for MPs and staff alike, to becoming gender-sensitive. The issue is closely related to symbolic representation, because women and marginalized social groups who become politically active, often enter a space they are strangers to, making them "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004). Parliaments are exemplary sites of hegemonic masculinity, they were (and are) designed traditionally by and for men. For example, they originally lacked women's restrooms, not to mention breastfeeding rooms (Childs, 2016). Work rules for the meeting, sitting, and voting times, discussion styles, parental leave or pregnancy provisions, ceremonies, language, rituals, art, and even names of estate premises impact who is represented and how (Lombardo & Meier, 2014). Even if parliamentary groups can seldom choose the resources and staffing provided to them (Murphy, 2016), they can ensure that men and women—in all their diversity—feel comfortable and can work without feeling alienated or discriminated against inside their group. They are uniquely well-placed to tackle inequalities related to work organization and—within certain boundaries imposed by the parliament—infrastructure.

Well-functioning work organization is core to successful group work. Yet it takes place in the broader context of infinite political work (often including long sitting hours) and the tensions of work–life balance, with both often disadvantaging those with care responsibilities, health issues, or other boundaries that limit excessive working hours that have no logical benefit. Thus, a crucial step for parliamentary groups would be to align their meeting times with public childcare opening hours, to include options for hybrid meetings, and/or flexible funding for additional childcare, both for MPs and staff, in case emergency decision-making upsets such work organization. Similarly, clear and transparent rules governing the parliamentary group concerning pregnancy, parental, and adoption leave, offering short-dated solutions for sick leave for children and other dependents, and other intimate life-related matters. These guarantee that demands related to one's private life are not only safeguarded but recognized and tangibly cared for. Admittedly, parliamentary groups usually lack the power to define (separate) such rules because they are decided by parliament, which means they need allies to effect change. Nevertheless, work–life balance for MPs and staff does constitute the cornerstone of gender-sensitive parliaments (Palmieri, 2011), and parliamentary groups can design their own measures. Excessive parliamentary workloads are particularly difficult for parents (Frech & Kopsch, 2024), disabled people, and others with caring and domestic obligations. If parliamentary measures are lacking, parliamentary groups can step in and offer support (e.g., childcare funding, group children's

room, or home office) for long sitting hours, events, or extraordinary situations occurring outside regular work hours.

The effect of #MeToo foregrounding sexual harassment, sexism, and sexualized violence, and #BlackLivesMatter starkly illustrating both blunt and subtle racism, led many parties and parliaments to adopt codes of conduct (Berthet, 2022; OSCE, 2021, p. 60). Parliamentary groups can replicate and adjust these to their parliamentary settings and needs. Moreover, the parliamentary group can subscribe to gender-sensitive and non-discriminatory language, and counter gendered, racist, and homophobic stereotypes through gender-aware public communication, both internally and externally. Given persistent (subtle) biases against women, particularly women of colour, in high-profile political offices (Bauer, 2020; Evans, 2016), this may require training to counter stereotyping by their members. Obviously, such measures and rules should not be limited to MPs but must ensure staff protection, given hierarchical and asymmetric working relationships.

As for infrastructure, parliamentary groups can ensure their office space is equally distributed for women and men MPs (considering different roles). Moreover, if not prohibited by parliamentary rules, parliamentary groups can aim to reorganize space by adjusting it for different needs. This can comprise nominating some toilets as gender neutral, which serves, next to non-binary, transgender, and intersex persons, also those accompanied by children (including diaper-changing spaces), and/or disabled persons of the opposite sex. Such a flexible use of toilets might also help to even out bathroom wait times: Women require about two or three times the capacity because of biological functions (e.g., menstruation and pregnancy) or because they are still primary caregivers and thus enter bathrooms with children (Verge, 2022a). Parliamentary groups can also provide lactation rooms or a children's office corner for MPs, staff, and visitors, to improve accessibility.

Safe and supportive parliamentary group workplaces can ultimately help to improve descriptive representation by accommodating different realities of life. Gender-equitable language, moreover, is important for substantive representation: Which groups are addressed and how? Who is represented as part of the state and nation? And whose names do public buildings and streets carry? All of these codify power hierarchies and relations, thereby setting the scene for what can easily be addressed for defying current norms and values (Lombardo & Meier, 2019).

7. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups in Their Parliamentary and Party Context

The previous sections gave an overview of the measures and practices necessary for parliamentary groups to improve their gender-sensitivity. However, parliamentary groups do not operate in a vacuum. To be precise, they are embedded in complex and extensive political systems, which impact their goals, strategies, procedures, and more. Next to the parliament itself, their relations to their party in central office are significant. In this remaining section, we briefly discuss some aspects of a gender-sensitive parliamentary group within this broader parliamentary and party context.

Parliamentary contexts differ strongly across countries and are dependent on the system of governance, the electoral system, the organization of, and relation(s) between, the legislative and executive powers, whether it is located within a multi-level governance system, and if so, where? Moreover, factors such as its origin and history, and how these translate into traditions, procedures, habits, and underlying norms and values are

at play. In this respect, it is difficult to prioritise or measure what works in what contexts. Although representation is a core function of all parliaments, it manifests in very diverse ways. The policy-making process, and the extent to which engagement with societal interests is institutionalized, differ strongly between inter-alia: majoritarian systems, consensual democracies, neo-corporatist systems with a tri-partite tradition (or not), let alone deliberative or direct democratic systems.

Next to systemic features, parliamentary contexts may also differ in how far they are professionalized institutions, hierarchical with a strict operational framework imposed upon MPs, parliamentary groups and other staff, or looser regulations granting greater liberty to organise themselves. Again, this impacts the efficacy with which parliamentary groups can implement the measures suggested in the previous sections and would require pushing for them through the agenda, the office of the parliamentary presidency, their office, and staff. The extent a parliament is professionalized also limits the scope to which its presidency and its staff can adopt measures. Part of this may also depend on how much financial (and other) resources the parliament makes available to develop such measures and practices.

Finally, the positions of parliamentary groups differ significantly within a given parliament and depend on political factors. Distinguishing features are whether the party in public office is the majority or the opposition, whether it is (part of) a minority government, the relative size of the parliamentary group as compared to other parliamentary groups, its age, or relative newness. It also matters if other parliamentary groups have the potential to be ideological or strategic allies. Then the degree to which "power with" (A. Allen, 1998) is practised among some or all parliamentary groups, or the extent to which the polity and politics are polarized, are the differences in position that influence which suggested measures and practices can be implemented.

The party context is best considered through the party in central office. Whilst the relationship between the party in public office and the party in central office is not intimate, the ties can be close. This depends on the type of parties involved, the party system (and the party's position within it), as well as the macro-level of the parliamentary context. Likewise, party organization and party ideology (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993) condition the options of parliamentary groups to develop gender-sensitive measures and practices. This depends on the liberty of a parliamentary group to act autonomously from the party in central office, particularly if there are tensions between the latter and the party in public office. The more the party in central office is inclined to support gender equality and measures to promote it, the more it might also facilitate this within the parliamentary group. This can not only be facilitated by party ideology, but also by the share of women within the party leadership, and in central office. Finally, a party in central office not inclined to take measures promoting gender equality, but which gives its members in public office greater liberty, may also provide space for the parliamentary group to develop gender and intersectional-sensitivity.

8. Conclusion

We have explored parliamentary groups as potential key actors in promoting gender-sensitive parliaments. While gender-sensitive parliaments are an emerging international norm, and an increasingly flourishing research field, the role of parliamentary groups in achieving a gender-sensitive parliament is surprisingly scarce. To that end, we considered how parliamentary groups could gender-sensitize themselves by isolating the issue within the parliamentary group and its responsibilities, as a stepping stone to a gender-sensitive parliament. Developing the definition of Childs and Palmieri (2023, p. 177), we identify a gender-sensitive

parliamentary group as one that "values and prioritizes gender equality as a social, economic, and political objective, and reorients and transforms its party culture, practice, and outputs towards those objectives, thereby contributing to an overall gender-sensitive parliament."

Contributing to the literature on gender-sensitive parliaments, gendered party politics, and gender equality in politics and political representation, we distilled an overview of the measures and practices necessary to improve the gender-sensitivity of parliamentary groups and their main activities within parliament, i.e., representation, policy-making, and engagement with societal interests. We also paid attention to the spatial aspect of parliamentary groups through notions of a gender-sensitive workplace.

We recognize that this is an initial attempt to grasp the possible features and activities of a gender-sensitive parliamentary group, let alone how to achieve gender-sensitivity, and monitor and evaluate its impact. Whilst this may be a goal in itself, it ultimately contributes to a more gender-sensitive and equal political realm, policies promoting gender equality, and a gender-equal society. A closer interrogation of how particular aspects of the broader parliamentary and party context we described in the previous section, can shape the acceptance, implementation, and impact of such measures would be helpful. Insightful questions might include: What type of measures apply to what type of parliamentary group, especially when considering the party in central office, its organization, gender composition, and ideology? What impact do macro-level features of the parliamentary context have? What relevance does the type of organisation, functioning, or position of the parliamentary group have within the political dynamic of a parliament? In the context of the latter, it would also be very interesting to investigate cooperation between parliamentary groups and possible spill-over effects from one parliamentary group to another, especially in the context of (electoral) competition.

While much of the above demands empirical research, we suggest that finer-grained conceptual research is necessary to flesh out and make sense of the contours of fully diverse and intersectional parliaments in diverse settings. In this respect, we note that whilst gender issues received ample attention, other social markers would benefit from more thorough theoretical development, both from a normative equality perspective, as well as an empirical societal perspective. We argue that it is time to move from gender-sensitive to intersectionality-sensitive parliaments and intersectionality-sensitive parliamentary groups. In addition, we suggest investigating whether our measures and practices also serve an intersectionality-sensitive parliamentary group and, by extension, an intersectionality-sensitive parliament. For example, what measures and practices are necessary and which ones need adaptation? In short, what works to promote intersectionality-sensitivity in different parliamentary settings and how?

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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