

VALENTINE BERTHET

The Discursive Politics of Gendered Violence and Bodily Rights in the European Parliament

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Violence and Bodily Rights in the
European Parliament

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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<i>Responsible supervisor and Custos</i>	Professor Johanna Kantola Tampere University Finland	
<i>Supervisor</i>	Docent Anna Elomäki Tampere University Finland	
<i>Pre-examiners</i>	Associate Professor Pauline Cullen Maynooth University Ireland	Associate Professor Josefina Erikson Uppsala University Sweden
<i>Opponent</i>	Professor Mona Lena Krook Rutgers University United States	

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ABSTRACT

The European Parliament (EP) is traditionally described in the academic literature as a champion of gender equality (Locher 2012). Because Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are directly elected, the EP is also considered the most democratic body of the European Union (EU). In this context, it is important to analyse how gender equality, as a precondition for democracy (Lombardo and Kantola 2019), is handled in the EP as a supranational policy field and as an internal objective for its own practices. This dissertation seeks to do so by analysing one aspect of gender equality policy in the EP, namely issues of gendered violence and bodily rights.

Previously understood as a unified and progressive actor, the EP is now characterised in the literature by tensions and contradictions within and among its political groups (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022). Contributing to these debates, this dissertation analyses the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights and its impact on the EP as a supranational policymaker for gender equality. Adopting a discursive approach to politics in the EP means analysing the discursive practices of the political groups surrounding issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, as well as the institutional discursive context and practices in which they are embedded. By analysing the discursive practices on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, in contrast with the EP's internal practices regarding the same issues, this dissertation scrutinises the mismatch between the two. It argues that the role of the EP as a democratic and legitimate supranational policymaker for gender equality is undermined when internal gendered inequalities persist.

The research objectives are, first, to analyse the discursive politics at stake when political groups debate gendered violence and bodily rights, both as supranational policy fields and internal practices. This includes, first, analysing the discursive practices of the political groups around those issues and, second, contrasting those discursive practices with the EP institutional practices. Finally, one objective is to assess the impact of the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights on the EP as a supranational policymaker for gender equality. Notably,

the analysis questions the EP's legitimacy as a supranational policymaker for gender equality to the extent that its own practices reproduce gendered inequalities.

These objectives underpin the following research questions: first, how are the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights discursively constructed in the EP by the political groups, both as supranational policy fields and vis-à-vis the EP's own internal practices? Second, what impact do these constructions have on the EP as a progressive supranational policymaker for gender equality?

The dissertation argues that the pursuit of gender equality at the supranational level is undermined when the institution in charge of delivering such policies, i.e., the European Parliament, is itself reproducing internal unequal gender practices.

This dissertation is an article-based dissertation comprised of four articles published in academic peer-reviewed journals, including one co-authored piece. It is part of the research project "Gender, party politics and democracy in Europe: A study of the European Parliament's party groups" (EUGenDem), which analysed the gendered policies and practices of the EP's political groups during the 8th and 9th legislative terms (i.e., 2014–2019 and 2019–2024), this dissertation studies the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP, which includes analysing the political groups' discursive practices surrounding these issues and the EP's institutional practices in this regard. Discursive practices include strategies of support and opposition to gendered violence and bodily rights, while the EP's institutional practices include opportunities to implement institutional reforms for gender equal practice or resistance. The articles produced for this dissertation are complementary. They include the sub-issues of the EU's ratification to the Istanbul Convention, the right to abortion in the EU, and sexual harassment within the European Parliament.

This dissertation seeks to contribute to debates in the gender and politics literature on backlashes against gender equality in the European Union by focusing on the case of the European Parliament as a supranational policymaker. Here, the European Parliament is regarded as a site of gendered policy formation, including the contestation to gender equality; a site of gendered violence, such as sexual harassment, and a site of resistance, including internal mobilization.

For this dissertation, the research material is comprised of interview data and documentary research. The interview material builds on the EUGenDem project's database of 135 interviews with MEPs and other parliamentary actors from all groups, respecting a gender balance. Methodologically, this dissertation employs qualitative interpretative methods of analysis based on the understanding that discourses are, from a Foucauldian perspective, powerful and meaning-constitutive.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Euroopan parlamenttia (EP) kuvaillaan akateemisessa kirjallisuudessa perinteisesti sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon puolustajana (Locher 2012). Koska Euroopan parlamentin jäsenet (mepit) valitaan vaaleilla, EP:tä pidetään Euroopan unionin (EU) demokraattisimpana elimenä. Tässä kontekstissa on tärkeää analysoida, kuinka Euroopan parlamentissa käsitellään sukupuolten välistä tasa-arvoa demokratian edellytyksenä (Lombardo & Kantola 2019) sekä ylikansallisena politiikan alana että sisäisenä tavoitteena sen omille käytänteilleen. Tutkielma pyrkii tähän analysoimalla EP:n tasa-arvopolitiikan yhtä näkökulmaa, nimittäin sukupuolittunutta väkivaltaa ja kehollista itsemääräämisoikeutta.

EP:tä on aiemmin pidetty yhtenäisenä ja progressiivisena toimijana, mutta nykyään kirjallisuudessa luonnehditaan, että poliittisten ryhmien sisällä ja niiden välillä on jännitteitä ja ristiriitoja (Kantola, Elomäki & Ahrens 2022). Tämä tutkielma osallistuu näihin keskusteluihin analysoimalla sukupuolitettua väkivallan ja kehollisen itsemääräämisoikeuden diskursiivista politiikkaa ja sen vaikutusta EP:en ylikansallisena päätöksentekijänä sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon kysymyksissä. Tässä tutkielmassa käytetään diskursiivista lähestymistapaa EP:n politiikkaan, mikä tarkoittaa, että siinä analysoidaan poliittisten ryhmien diskursiivisia käytänteitä, jotka liittyvät sukupuolittuneeseen väkivaltaan ja keholliseen itsemääräämisoikeuteen, sekä institutionaalista diskursiivista kontekstia ja käytänteitä, jossa ne esiintyvät. Tässä tutkielmassa analysoidaan sukupuolittuneen väkivallan ja kehollisen itsemääräämisoikeuden diskursiivisia käytänteitä verrattuna EP:n sisäisiin käytänteisiin niiden osalta, ja tarkastellaan niiden yhteensopimattomuutta. Tutkielmassa esitetään, että EP:n rooli demokraattisena ja lainmukaisena ylikansallisena päätöksentekijänä sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon kysymyksissä on heikentynyt, koska sisäistä sukupuolitettua epätasa-arvoa esiintyy edelleen.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on ensinnäkin analysoida vaakalaudalla olevaa diskursiivista politiikkaa, kun poliittiset ryhmät väittelevät sukupuolitettua väkivallasta ja kehollisesta itsemääräämisoikeudesta sekä ylikansallisina politiikan aloina että sisäisinä käytänteinä. Tähän liittyy ensinnäkin poliittisten ryhmien

diskursiivisten käytänteiden analysoiminen näihin aiheisiin liittyen, ja toisekseen niiden diskursiivisten käytänteiden vertailu EP:n institutionaalsiin käytänteisiin. Lopuksi, yhtenä tavoitteena on arvioida sukupuolitettun väkivallan ja kehollisen itsemääräämisoikeuden diskursiivisen politiikan merkitystä EP:en ylikansallisena päätöksentekijänä sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon kysymyksissä. Analyysissa kyseenalaistetaan eritoten EP:n lainmukaisuus ylikansallisena päätöksentekijänä sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon kysymyksissä, sillä sen omat käytännöt toistavat sukupuolitettuja epätasa-arvoja.

Nämä tavoitteet ovat perusta seuraaville tutkimuskysymyksille: ensinnäkin, kuinka poliittiset ryhmät EP:ssä rakentavat diskursiivisesti sukupuolitettun väkivallan ja kehollisen itsemääräämisoikeuden kysymyksiä sekä ylikansallisena politiikan alana että verrattuna EP:n omiin sisäisiin käytäntöihin? Toisekseen, minkälainen vaikutus näillä rakenteilla on EP:en progressiivisena ja ylikansallisena päätöksentekijänä sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon kysymyksissä?

Tutkielmassa esitetään, että sukupuolten välisen tasa-arvon tavoittelu ylikansallisella tasolla heikentyy, kun käytänteiden toteutumisesta vastuussa oleva instituutio, kuten esimerkiksi Euroopan parlamentti, toistaa sisäisiä epätasa-arvoisia sukupuolikäytänteitä.

Tämä tutkielma perustuu neljään artikkeliin, jotka on julkaistu akateemisissa vertaisarvioituissa julkaisuissa, ja joista yksi on useamman henkilön kirjoittama. Tutkielma on myös osa tutkimusprojektia “Gender, party politics and democracy in Europe: A study of the European Parliament’s party groups”, joka analysoi EP:n poliittisten ryhmien sukupuolitettuja menettelytapoja ja käytänteitä kahdeksannen ja yhdeksannen toimikauden ajalta (eli 2014–2019 ja 2019–2024). Tässä tutkielmassa tutkitaan sukupuolitettun väkivallan ja kehollisen itsemääräämisoikeuden diskursiivista politiikkaa EP:ssä. Tähän liittyy myös poliittisten ryhmien diskursiivisten käytänteiden analysointi ja EP:n institutionaaliset käytänteet näihin aiheisiin liittyen. Diskursiivisiin käytänteisiin sisältyvät strategiat, joilla voi tukea ja vastustaa sukupuolitettua väkivaltaa ja kehollista itsemääräämisoikeutta, kun taas EP:n institutionaaliset käytännöt mahdollistavat institutionaalisten uudistusten jalkauttamisen sukupuolten välisiä tasa-arvokäytänteitä tai vastustusta koskien.

Tutkielmaa varten kirjoitetut artikkelit täydentävät tutkielmaa. Ne sisältävät lisäkysymyksiä EU:n Istanbulin sopimuksen ratifioinnista, oikeudesta aborttiin EU:ssa ja seksuaalisesta häirinnästä Euroopan parlamentissa.

Otan tutkielmassa kantaa sukupuoli- ja politiikkakirjallisuudessa esiintyviin keskusteluihin takaiskuista sukupuolten välistä tasa-arvoa vastaan Euroopan Unionissa keskittyen Euroopan parlamenttiin ylikansallisenä päätöksentekijänä. Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan Euroopan parlamenttia paikkana, jossa sukupuolitettuja menettelytapoja muodostuu, mukaan lukien väittelyn sukupuolten välisestä tasa-arvosta, sekä paikkana, jossa tapahtuu sukupuolitettua väkivaltaa, kuten seksuaalista häirintää, ja paikkana, jossa tapahtuu vastarintaa, kuten sisäistä mobilisaatiota.

Tämän tutkielman tutkimusmateriaali koostuu haastatteludatasta ja dokumentaarisesta tutkimuksesta. Haastattelumateriaali koostuu EUGenDem projektin tietokannan 135 haastattelusta meppien ja muiden parlamentaaristen tekijöiden kanssa kaikista poliittisista ryhmistä ottaen huomioon sukupuolijakauman. Tutkielmassa käytetään kvalitatiivisen ja tulkinnallisen analyysin metodeja, jotka perustuvat siihen, että diskurssi on foucault'laisesta näkökulmasta voimallista ja merkityksiä muodostavaa.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ALDE	Alliance for Liberals and Democratic for Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EFDD	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
ENF	Europe of Nations and Freedom
EP	European Parliament
EPP	The European People's Party
EU	European Union
FEMM	Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality
GAL	Green-Alternative-Libertarian
Greens/EFA	Greens/European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	European United Left/Nordic Green Left
ID	Identity and Democracy group
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NPD	National Party Delegation
PG	Political group
RRP	Radical Right Populist
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
TAN	Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist
UN	United Nations
US	United States

ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

- Publication I Berthet, Valentine (2022). Norm under fire: support for and opposition to the European Union's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, published online first.
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- Publication III Berthet, Valentine & Kantola Johanna (2021). Gender, violence, and political institutions: struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament. *Social Politics*, 28(1), 143-167.
- Publication IV Berthet, Valentine (2022). Mobilization against sexual harassment in the European Parliament: the MeTooEP campaign. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(2).

1 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally described in the academic literature as a “real champion for gender equality” (Locher 2012, 68), the European Parliament (EP) is also regarded as the most democratic body of the European Union (EU) because its members – the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) – are directly elected by the citizens. Simultaneously, an emerging trend in the academic literature on gender and politics is analysing gender equality as a precondition for democracy (Lombardo and Kantola 2019; Kantola 2022). Accordingly, this dissertation scrutinizes the role and legitimacy of the EP as a democratic supranational policymaker on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in light of its own internal gendered practices.

Unique in many ways, the European Parliament counts 705 MEPs elected domestically from 27 member-states. These MEPs have their own national institutional backgrounds, traditions, and languages, but they come together in a well-established institutional setting that organises the EP’s parliamentary work. Once elected, MEPs conglomerate into political groups (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022). Political groups are key political players in the EP because they politicise core issues (including gender equality) and shape policies. They are generally formed according to shared political affinities between MEPs but are also shaped by internal tensions, especially between National Party Delegations (NPDs) (see, for instance, Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). The political groups constitute an important site of research for the purpose of this dissertation because they contribute to shaping a discourse on gender equality in the European Parliament.

With regard to gender equality, the EP is often presented in the literature as a strong supporter and progressive agenda-setter at the supranational level (Montoya 2013; Van der Vleuten 2019; Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín 2019; see also section 2.3 below). Nevertheless, a growing body of literature now describes it as shaped by tensions and contradictions within and among its political groups vis-à-vis gender equality (Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2016, 2019; Kantola and Lombardo 2021;

Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021; Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022). This means that gender equality is a disputed concept in the European Parliament and a norm subject to contestation. In addition, backlashes against gender equality have spread across Europe, and the norm has become a key site of contestation domestically (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021; Verloo and Paternotte 2018; Verloo 2018) and in the EP (Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2016). For instance, as part of this backlash, non-EU countries have withdrawn from international treaties preventing violence against women and domestic violence, and EU countries have passed new legislations that restrict LGBTIQ+ and abortion rights.

In the EP, the backlash against gender equality came along an increasing representation of Eurosceptic radical-right populist groups (RRPs), mostly after the 2016 elections (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). For instance, a recent study estimated the number of MEPs contesting gender equality in the EP at approximately 30% (Zacharenko 2020). Such backlash is part of a broader project to contest the global gender equality norm, which has developed internationally since the 1960s (see Gilby et al. 2021 for an example of this international backlash). In reaction to this, scholars have deployed various analytical, theoretical, and methodological tools to uncover the diverse strategies of opposition on the part of anti-gender actors and highlight the possibilities for pro-gender equality actors to defend the norm, including in the EU (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Korolczuk 2020; Roggeband 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) and in the EP (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). Although pro-equality groups and MEPs managed to resist the opposition in the EP thus far by sidelining it during policymaking processes (see, for instance, Elomäki and Kantola 2022), the presence of anti-gender actors reshuffles the nature of debates over gender equality and forces pro-equality actors to position themselves vis-à-vis those attacks.

In this context, this dissertation scrutinises the role of the EP in advancing gender equality within the EU via analysing the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights. These issues have long been recognised as crucial to the pursuit of gender equality's objectives (Montoya 2013; Elman 2013; Mottier 2013; Ferree et al 2002). In addition, living free from violence and having control over one's own body are international principles and standards of rights and freedom that have shaped current western understandings of citizenship and democracy (see, for example, Siim 2013). Therefore, the issues were selected for their complementarity

in the sense that their combined analysis provides a fuller account of the most advanced and recent developments on gender equality issues in the EU, as well as because they shed light on various aspects of gender equality. On one hand, gendered violence deals with an aspect of gender equality that is traditionally well accepted by policymakers, i.e., combating violence against women. On the other hand, issues of bodily rights deal with an aspect of gender equality that is typically controversial because it is often regarded as falling within the scope of morality politics, i.e., abortion rights (Lovenduski and Outshoorn 1986). Section 3.1 below further develops and justifies the use of gendered violence and bodily rights as concepts to study the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention, a right to abortion in the EU, and sexual harassment in the EP.

These objectives underpin the following research questions: first, how are the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights discursively constructed in the EP by the political groups, both as supranational policy fields and vis-à-vis the EP's own internal practices? Second, what impact do these constructions have on the EP as a progressive and democratic supranational policymaker for gender equality? To address these questions, the dissertation draws on a theoretical framework developed to meet its research objectives, namely the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights. This framework fits the research objectives because it includes a discursive and institutional layer in the analysis of the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP.

As a result, a key contribution of this framework is to simultaneously analyse the EP as a supranational policymaker for gender equality and the EP as an actor with internal gendered practices. This draws attention to a mismatch between the two in the sense that the EP does not put into practice internally what it deems important in policies for member states. This means that it is important to turn the analytical gaze internally, toward the EP's own practices. Such an analytical perspective assumes, then, that the democratic legitimacy of a progressive supranational policymaker for gender equality is best assessed against a review of its own gendered practices. Therefore, the first article (Article I) regards the EP as a supranational policymaker for gendered violence by analyzing the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence. The second article (Article II) regards the EP as a supranational policymaker for bodily rights by analyzing a right to abortion in the EU. The third and fourth articles (Articles III and IV) regard the EP as an actor with internal practices of gendered

violence by analyzing the issue of sexual harassment and the forms of resistance to it in the EP. Therefore, the dissertation analyses the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights, both as supranational policy fields and as internal practices, by paying attention to the discursive struggles problematising these issues (Bacchi 2017, 2009; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009).

The research material is comprised of two distinct datasets. The first set corresponds to material available online and produced via documentary research, while the second set corresponds to interview data produced as part of a larger research project. The project ‘Gender, party politics and democracy in Europe: A study of European Parliament’s party groups’ (EUGenDem) produced a large interview dataset (N = 135) with parliamentary actors from all groups, respecting gender balance. EUGenDem is a European Research Council (ERC)-funded project comprised of six researchers, including myself, which provides a systematic analysis of the gendered policies and practices of the EP’s political groups during the 8th (2014–2019) and 9th legislative terms (2019–2024). The project and its large interview dataset were extensively used in this dissertation and provided a crucial background on the gendered policies and practices in the EP’s political groups. Methodologically, this dissertation employs qualitative, constructivist and interpretative methods of analysis (Bevir 2006; Soss 2006; Yanow 2006; Weiss 1994) based on the understanding that discourses are powerful and meaning constitutive (Foucault 1972; 1980).

The present summary chapter is outlined as follow. First, I detail the research context concerning policy developments around the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights at the three levels: international, the European Union and the European Parliament. Second, I present the theoretical considerations involved when studying these issues, including the several concepts used in the literature to refer to them, the particularities of studying them within political institutions and the contestations they are subjected to. Third, I present the research design, including the methodology, research material and method of analysis. Here, I also consider my positionality as a researcher, as well as the ethical commitments and research reliability. Fourth, I introduce the articles, including their research aims and research questions, as well as their outcomes. Finally, I discuss the overarching findings, answer the dissertation’s research questions, and reflect on the overarching research’s outcomes.

2 RESEARCH CONTEXT

To study the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in the European Parliament, it is first important to review their development in the dissertation's multidimension research context (see Figure 1). I will first review their development at the international level, then at the supranational level of the European Union and, finally, at the level of the European Parliament.

2.1 THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Feminists have paved the way for the development of issues of gendered violence and bodily rights via the politicization of gender equality at the international level within the growing framework of human rights (Friedmann 1995; Cook 1995; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ackerly 2001; Mintrom and True 2001; Zwingel 2005, 2012; Chinkin and Charlesworth 2006). For instance, the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 marked an important step in harmonising national legislations in combatting gender-based discriminations. In particular, it constitutes the first human rights treaty to reaffirm the reproductive rights of women (Htun and Weldon 2018, 2012; Baldez 2014; Simmons 2009).

With regard to gendered violence, the issue has been an important point on the agenda of feminist transnational advocacy networks (TANs) (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 1998; Montoya 2013). In the 1990s, their activism successfully influenced countries in adopting policies aimed at combating violence against women (Montoya 2009). In fact, the coining of the term 'violence against women' was an important step in congregating various gendered forms of violence under the same umbrella while also raising awareness among the international community (Montoya 2013). The concept of the 'boomerang effect' illustrates the significance of lobbying at the transnational level, which then has an impact at the national level (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Zippel 2004). In the mid-1990s, the legitimacy of violence against women as a human rights policy issue was strengthened via several international mechanisms,

such as the first ever Special Rapporteur on violence against women, which was initiated in 1994 to strengthen human rights around the world (Bunch 1995). The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adoption by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 constituted an important development after the CEDAW because they defined gender-based violence and sexual harassment, among other actions, as forms of discrimination incompatible with human dignity. By 1995, at the Beijing Platform for Action, the idea that the protection of human rights included the eradication of violence against women had already taken root.

Recent policy developments have included the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. Adopted in 2011, the text constitutes the most extensive protection against gender-based violence. Its legally binding provisions ensure a higher level of commitment from state parties (McQuigg 2017; De Vido 2016; Nousiainen and Chinkin 2016). Its independent expert body, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), carefully monitors its implementation. The Convention is the first international document of a legal nature to provide a definition of gender and gender-based violence. It is also the first international legal text to discuss violence against women in terms of gendered and structural inequalities (Peroni 2016; Niemi, Peroni and Stoyanova 2020). The Convention has had a significant impact in improving national legislation against gendered violence and placed the value of gender equality at the centre of debates in the European region, beyond the EU (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021).

However, the Convention was the subject of several backlashes, which have included contestations at the international level during its drafting process (Acar and Popa 2016) and after its entry into force domestically. A few examples include the Bulgarian constitutional court's decision that deemed it unconstitutional, Turkey's withdrawal and the Polish government declaration of its intent to withdraw. Most backlashes have relied on the constructed assumption that the Convention carries what opponents call a gender ideology, which is believed by them to constitute a risk to traditional family values (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Sekowska-Kozłowska 2020). This anti-feminist/gender rhetoric defends heteronormative and traditional understandings of nuclear families, reproductive rights and education based on conservative, gendered expectations (Kováts 2017;

Kuhar and Patternotte 2017). This discourse is also visible in the European Parliament, as discussed in this dissertation (see Section 3.3).

With regard to bodily rights, the issue has been less established and faced stronger and more consistent opposition from global religious and secular actors at the international level. For instance, in the 1960s, reproductive rights were mostly discussed in terms of population control (Eager 2004; Hartmann 2016), with objectives far removed from principles of self-determination and autonomy. International policy developments in favour of women's rights in the 1970s and 1980s have not included bodily rights issues. In fact, in 1984, the Reagan Administration introduced a Global Gag Rule that prevented US federal money from being used to promote abortion as a method of family planning. This illustrates the unfavorable political environment at the time and the limited space in which to formulate claims in favour of bodily rights (Crane and Dusenberry 2004). Nevertheless, TANs strengthened their advocacy on these issues, in defiance of governmental restrictions, and the first International Conference on Population and Development marked, in 1994, the creation of a Programme of Action that recognised the right to sexual and reproductive health, gender equality and women's empowerment as part of population and development strategies (Thomas et al. 2014). The objectives were reaffirmed at the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (Htun 2003). These two international texts are regarded as “‘qualifying language’ for future UN resolutions pertaining to [sexual health and reproductive rights (SRHR)]” (Gilby et al. 2021: 2). Although the CEDAW does not directly mention abortion, the Beijing Platform for Action pushes countries to deal with the health risks involved in unsafe abortions (Htun and Weldon 2018).

Contestations at the international level remain a contemporary problem and mostly focus on access to safe abortion, comprehensive sexual education, and modern contraceptives (Gilby et al. 2021; Htun and Weldon 2018; Htun 2003). International negotiations (i.e., at the UN) remain a main site of struggle, in which state and non-state actors, such as religious groups or NGOs, work against reproductive rights and gender equality. They seek to eliminate references to abortion from provisions (Htun and Weldon 2018) and form alliances to replace SRHR language with conservative terms about traditional family values (Gilby et al. 2021).

In conclusion, at the international level, issues of violence against women have been easier to promote than issues of gendered violence, as illustrated by the backlashes against the Istanbul Convention. In policymaking, gendered violence is thus a contested concept, while violence against women is more acceptable. In turn, issues of bodily rights have consistently been more controversial than issues of violence against women, notably because they raise concerns about moral values.

2.2 THE EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL

As seen above, many policy developments on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights have begun at the international level. We now turn to address their developments and politicisation at the European Union level. The EU is a global actor known for its normative power in the promotion of human rights and democracy (Manners and Whitman 1998; Sedelmeier 2011). Securing peace via the economic integration of partners was initially at the core of the European Economic Community's creation (Manners 2005). The regulated market was set up alongside the consolidation of the rule of law and fundamental rights in Europe, which were objectives compatible with the development of a European gender equality policy framework (Petó and Manners 2006).

Chronologically and historically, the development of EU legal instruments pertaining to gender equality is nonlinear. Gender equality policy was first placed at the center of European integration in the form of primary and secondary laws. The adoption of Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome is commonly cited in the literature as a pivotal moment in the history of EU gender equality policy (Hoskyns 1996; Van der Vleuten 2007; Kantola 2010). It introduced a principle of equal pay for men and women workers, which was later strengthened by the Equal Pay Directive of 1975. In addition, the Equal Treatment Directive of 1976, introducing the principle of equal treatment for men and women with regard to employment access, vocational training, promotion and working conditions, and the Social Security Directive of 1978, dealing with sex-based discrimination, are also typically regarded as important developments (for an overview, see Jacquot 2015). Despite their importance, these developments were subject to criticism because they limited gender equality to the sphere of employment (Kantola 2010; Petó and Manners 2006; Mazey 1998).

Policy developments pertaining to gendered violence have included binding measures against the trafficking of women (Locher 2007) and sexual harassment in the workplace (Zippel 2006, 2008). The issue of anti-trafficking resulted in two binding texts, but these were criticised because they framed trafficking exclusively in terms of illegal migration and transnational organised crime (Kantola 2010; Locher 2007; Askola 2007). The issue of sexual harassment resulted in the 2002 Directive on Equal Treatment, which reformed the 1976 Directive mentioned above. The text regarded sexual harassment as a violation of dignity at work (Zippel, 2006), which was criticised for individualising the problem and ignoring links with gender inequalities (Baer 1996; Zippel 2006). The reform was adopted thanks to proactive TANs that provided the necessary expertise on sexual harassment (Zippel 2006, 85). Furthermore, it was adopted despite the resistance of member states that deemed sexual harassment a cultural problem that could not be solved via EU-wide regulations (Zippel 2006, 82). Sexual harassment was, along with trafficking in women, a first type of gendered violence to be regulated by the EU under the form of a directive, although it first began as a soft-law measure.

Beyond the development of gender equality via hard-law, soft-law measures and activities expanded the scope of gender equality policy beyond the limits of the employment sphere (Jacquot 2015; Kantola, 2010; Montoya 2013). For instance, domestic violence and violence against women were politicised via the three DAPHNE projects that financed specific programmes on those issues (Jacquot 2015; Montoya 2013). In relation to domestic violence, EU competences were less clear than those regarding issues of anti-trafficking and sexual harassment. Therefore, soft-law measures on domestic violence first consisted of collecting harmonised and standardised data in member states, agreeing on a common definition and common indicators (Kantola 2010, 2006; Montoya 2008). In the 2010s, some examples of adopted directives can be regarded as contributing to the legal framework against domestic violence. These includes the 2012 Victims' Right Directive, the 2011 European Protection Order Directive and the 2011 Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children Directive. However, none directly tackled the issue.

One attempt to partially fill this legislative gap was made via the European Commission's roadmap and proposal for the ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention on violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) by the European Union, as already mentioned in the previous section. Although the European Commission signed the Convention in June 2017, the

processes of ratification has since been blocked in the European Council, which represents member states' heads of government. The legal advantages of ratifying the Convention, and the current challenges at the domestic level have been discussed extensively in the academic literature (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021; Niemi, Peroni and Stoyanova 2020; McQuigg 2017; De Vido 2017). As explained in Section 5.1 below, this dissertation discusses the challenges of the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention supranationally, from the perspective of the discourses in the European Parliament. More recently, the European Commission Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 included an option for a new legislative proposal addressing violence against women in the EU if the ratification remains blocked.

In contrast, the politicisation of and policy developments regarding issues of bodily rights, including abortion, in the EU have been weak. Issues of abortion are controversial issues in the EU, and they are best dealt with as part of the EU's external affairs, namely by targeting non-EU countries. As shown above, the development of EU gender equality policies largely remained within the scope of employment. In this context, reproductive rights and abortion were too far removed from this frame of reference (Jacquot 2015; Locher 2012, 80). The only EU regulation in relation to abortion concerned the protocol to the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, which provided Ireland with the guarantee that its national abortion law would not be influenced by EU laws (i.e., before the Eighth Amendment repeal). This was made possible by the early-established EU's position that questions of morality and human life will be regulated by member states. This explains why the EU has no binding policies on reproductive rights and has been slow in developing non-binding measures at the EP level. However, the EU made a significant investment in SRHR through development aid, as part of its external policies (Nowicka 2011). However, such measures are also at risk when pressure against SRHR persists because this will encourage the EU to decrease its funding in the developing world (ibid.).

Typically understood as belonging to the sphere of morality politics, issues of abortion are prone to provoke fierce controversies at the EU level (Euchner and Engeli 2018; Mondo 2018; Mondo and Close 2019; Zacharenko 2017; Kantola and Rolandsen 2016; Mondo 2014; see also Htun and Weldon 2018 for an analysis of the role of religious actors). Petra Ahrens has described the existence of a 'backlash triangle' comprised of Malta, Poland and Ireland due to their consistent opposition to abortion (2018). Some scholars argued that a common EU position on issues of

abortion is important because its absence supports the agenda of anti-gender actors (Zacharenko 2017). By shying away from a ‘binding move towards anchoring the liberalization of abortion into the EU legal framework’ (Euchner and Engeli 2021, 73), the EU is responsible for the fact that abortion rights remain severely restricted in some member states and open to reconsideration, given serious conservative trends, in others. In its new Gender Equality Strategy for the years 2020–2025, the Commission did not mention access to safe and legal abortion and remained tentative regarding sexual and reproductive rights. In comparison, as explained in the next section, the European Parliament has attempted, on three occasions, to politicize the issue supranationally, via the 2001 Van Lancker resolution, the 2013 Estrela report (Kantola and Rolandsen 2016) and the 2021 Matić resolution (see Section 5.2 below).

This section has shown that the EU gender equality policy development has included issues of gendered violence via the adoption of provisions against trafficking of women, sexual harassment and, to some extent, domestic violence. However, it has been far weaker in relation to issues of bodily rights, including abortion. Overall, even if gender equality has developed overtime as a normative value in discourse and policy, its definition and implementation remain uneven (David and Guerrina 2013; Kantola 2010). This has led some scholars to argue that gender equality, as a norm, played a greater role in the EU’s development activities in non-EU countries, rather than internally, specifically by promoting a certain kind of economic market and demarcating its own identity vis-à-vis others (Galligan and Clavero 2012; Woodward and Van der Vleuten 2014; David and Guerrina 2013; Kantola 2010).

2.3 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT LEVEL

In comparison to other EU institutions, the European Parliament has played an important role in raising awareness on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Since the Treaty of Lisbon, the EP has acted much like a national parliament over the Commission and the Council, as discussed below. In relation to policy, it is often described in the literature as a rights defender, including regarding anti-discrimination and gender equality (van der Vleuten 2019). Two bodies are of key relevance when studying the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP. These are the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality

(FEMM) and the political groups. Before detailing them in relation to this dissertation, I will introduce certain policy developments of gendered violence and bodily rights within the EP.

Since its first direct election in 1979, the EP is the most democratic body of the EU institutions. While it once had the reputation of a weak institution, before the Lisbon Treaty, its powers significantly increased overtime. In the literature, this expansion of power has been described as remarkable (Abels 2019; Corbett et al. 2016; Ripoll Servent 2018) because the EP has developed ‘from a toothless consultation chamber to a powerful legislative institution’ (Hix and Høyland 2013, 183). It now acts as a co-legislator, together with the Commission and the European Council, and as a budgetary authority and approves the nomination of, for instance, the President of the Commission and the Commissioners (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022; Bressanelli and Chelotti 2020; Héritier et al. 2019; Rittberger 2012).

With regard to gender equality policy, every strengthening of the EP’s powers was welcomed by feminist advocates (Kantola 2010). In the gender and politics literature, the EP is traditionally described as a ‘real champion for gender equality’ (Locher 2012, 68) and ‘a strong supporter of gender justice’ (van der Vleuten 2012, 49), with important implications for member states (van der Vleuten 2019). For instance, regarding sexual harassment, the EP greatly supported EU legislation (Zippel 2006) but has been less attentive to its own internal practices (see Politico 2017 and Sections 5.3, 5.4 and 6 below). Furthermore, the EP often organises public hearings in which civil society organizations (CSOs), including feminist actors, are invited to take part in debates (Ahrens forthcoming). Descriptive representation of women has gradually increased since 1979 and is now higher than in most national parliaments (40,4% after the 2019 elections). Women MEPs have also secured more leadership positions within the EP than in other national settings, for instance, as vice-presidents and committee chairs (Kantola and Miller 2022). While descriptive representation is not enough, the strong presence of women MEPs constitutes a ‘fruitful ground’ (Locher 2012, 68) that has positive effects on substantive representation (van der Vleuten 2019; Mushaben 2019). In particular, the presence of critical actors (Celis and Child 2008), which is so important for the diffusion of norms such as gender equality (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), played a significant role in the promotion of gender equality policies at the supranational level (Mushaben 2019).

Pro-gender equality actors in the European Parliament are mostly found in the FEMM Committee. Set up in 1984, FEMM has consistently been a key actor in the promotion of gender equality policy in the EU. The FEMM Committee is also an important entry point for CSOs wishing to engage in equality issues (Ahrens forthcoming). Its members have introduced and promoted a feminist discourse in parliamentary debates, including debates on gendered violence and bodily rights issues, and have successfully lobbied to obtain the necessary support to pass resolutions (Kantola 2010). For instance, FEMM's ranks have included powerful advocates on the issue of violence against women, with a progressive agenda inspired by developments at the international level (Montoya 2013; Locher 2007). Notably, it adopted the first ever parliamentary report on violence against women in 1984. At that point, the parliamentary debates surrounding the report were "heated and lengthy" (Locher 2007, 147), indicating the controversies surrounding the issue and the fact that the EU was expanding its gender policy toward new grounds (Kantola 2010; Locher 2007; Hoskyns 1996). In sum, the FEMM was and remains a major site of gender equality policy development (Ahrens 2016; Rolandsen Agustín 2012) and a strong agenda setter and discourse maker on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights.

Another important site in which to study the development of gender equality policy issues in the EP are its political groups because they compete to influence policies via internal negotiations. Formed after each election, political groups are different from national political groups because they comprise of alliances between several national party delegations (NPDs). In that sense, they are unique to the EP (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022). There were eight political groups in the 8th legislative term (2014–2019), when the data production for this dissertation started. These groups were comprised of the centre-right conservative European People's Party (EPP); the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR); the liberals in the form of Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) and the left in the form of European United Left/Nordic Green Left group (GUE/NGL), and two smaller radical-right populist groups, the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). In the 9th legislative term (2019–2024), the EFDD was dissolved, the ALDE became Renew Europe (Renew) and the ENF became the radical-right populist group Identity and Democracy group (ID), which grew in size. The groups' sizes vary greatly, from 187 MEPs in EPP to 39 in GUE/NGL, and

play an important role in the groups' political influence and the power dynamics between them. For instance, the attribution of leadership positions and legislative reports depends on the group's size (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022).

The EP's expansion of power has concomitantly meant an increase in power for its political groups (Ahrens et al. 2022). With it, a more solid group cohesion has developed between the main pro-EU groups (Hix, Noury and Roland 2007). The EP is usually organised around a "grand coalition" between the EPP and S&D. However, the two groups have recently disagreed more frequently over socio-political issues and are losing their majority in the Parliament (Kantola and Rolandsen Agustin 2016). In the EU politics literature, the political groups are often divided via several dimensions, including a socio-economic left/right axis (Hix, Noury and Roland 2005); an integration/ demarcation axis (Ibid.); a pro-/anti-EU integration axis (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002); a cultural/moral axis (Mondo and Close 2019); and, finally, a GAL (Greens, Alternatives, Libertarians)/ TAN (Traditionalists, Authoritarians, Nationalists) axis (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002; Brack 2018). The PGs on the GAL dimension tend to support ecology, alternative politics and libertarianism, while the PGs on the TAN dimension tend to support sovereignty and traditional values (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002).

With the increasing representation of RRP's and Eurosceptic groups in 2014, the grand coalition between the EPP and S&D groups is no longer 'the sole motor of EP policy-making' (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022, 2). The new political landscape brought about an increased polarisation, with new strategies to oppose supranational decision-making and a need for broader pro-EU coalitions (Brack 2018; McDonnell and Werner 2019; Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019). The impact of these groups is mostly visible at the discursive level rather than in the substantive content of policies, notably because they have been excluded by other groups via the 'cordon sanitaire' (Brack 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019).

Regarding gender equality policy, political groups are key actors in politicising these issues on the EP's agenda. Recent research on the political groups from a gender perspective has shown that gender importantly shapes the practices and policies of the political groups (Kantola 2022; Kantola and Rolandsen Agustin 2019). Simultaneously, a recent study suggests that approximately 30% of MEPs opposed gender equality as a supranational norm following the 2019 elections, a

percentage that has doubled since the previous term (Zacharenko 2020). As a result, gender has become a topic around which groups polarise; while some support it, fiercely others oppose it as irrelevant and dangerous (Kantola 2022). For instance, gender equality is a fundamental principle for the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL; a flexible norm for S&D and ALDE/RENEW; contradictory for the EPP, EFDD and ECR and irrelevant or dangerous for the ENF/ID (Kantola 2022; see also Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021).

Nonetheless, internal tensions and contradictions in groups exist (Kantola 2022). Political groups' internal dynamics and their approach to gender equality policy are greatly influenced by national party delegations (NPDs) (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). While the largest delegations amass more political power (Ahrens and Kantola 2022; Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet 2022; Kreppel 2002), they can also influence the importance attributed to gender equality in the group and in the EP. For instance, research found that conflicts in the EP in relation to reproductive rights mostly reflected the salience of the issue at the national level (Chiva 2019; Cullen 2019). In other words, MEPs' voting behavior on morality issues (including abortion) illustrates a split between progressive S&D delegations versus conservative S&D delegations and progressive EPP delegations versus conservative EPP delegations (Mondo and Close 2019). Here, delegations such as Italy, Malta and Croatia are regarded as the "most active conservative EPP" delegations, while Sweden, France and Belgium are regarded as "dissenting progressive EPP delegations" (Mondo and Close 2019, 1006). In addition, research on opposition to gender equality in the EP found that, although some political groups, such as the EFDD, tend to oppose gender vigorously, internal conflicts exist. For instance, the Italian delegation (M5S) in the EFDD supported gender equality and sexuality policies in discourse (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). Likewise, similar patterns were found in relation to human rights, in which NPDs' different views on human rights, gender equality and religion influenced groups' positions or explained the lack of a common position (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021).

Finally, alongside the increase in RRP groups in the EP, anti-gender MEPs working against the supranational gender equality norm have entered the FEMM Committee. As a result, debates have become more radicalised in FEMM (Warasin et al. 2019). Nevertheless, FEMM remains active on issues of gendered violence, notably via its active role in pushing for the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and bodily rights, notably via the recent adoption of the Matic

resolution on sexual and reproductive rights in the EU. In sum, despite the presence of RRP groups in FEMM, the traditional centre-left coalition still dominates decision-making, and anti-gender opposition has thus far been sidelined (Elomäki and Kantola 2021).

In conclusion, this section has contextualized the dissertation's objective in relation to its research settings: the European Parliament and its political groups. Furthermore, it detailed the importance of studying the FEMM Committee and political groups when analysing the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP. The next section presents the dissertation's theoretical framework.

3 THEORIZING THE DISCURSIVE POLITICS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE AND BODILY RIGHTS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

To study issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP, the dissertation's articles cover three sub-issues: the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence, the right to abortion in the EU and sexual harassment in the EP. As discussed below, several umbrella terms are used in the literature to refer to violence against women, abortion, and sexual harassment. Nonetheless, scholars have theorised the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in rather similar ways. Living free from violence and having control over one's body are often subsumed under the terms 'bodily integrity' or 'bodily rights', which are understood as preconditions for citizenship rights (Siim 2013; Lister 2003; Outshoorn et al. 2012). While the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention and sexual harassment in the EP are evidently issues relevant to gendered violence, abortion rights are not always perceived as falling within the scope of violence. Restriction to abortion rights can be regarded as a form of gendered violence, therefore 'gendered violence' and 'bodily rights' are not exclusionary. Instead, the addition of "bodily rights" to "gendered violence" stresses something more. From a democratic perspective, as adopted in this dissertation to study the EP as a democratic, gendered actor, it is not enough to pay attention to abortion rights when they are threatened of restriction. Discourses on abortion rights are always important to study because they provide indication on the status, nature, and vitality of democracy. As a result, I chose in this dissertation to use both terms, "gendered violence and bodily rights" to stress their complementarity and their links to citizenship and democratic rights.

In this dissertation, the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights framework includes an analysis of three dimensions— policy, politics, and polity. Together, they are conceptualised, as follows, to answer the dissertation's research questions. Although policy, politics and polity are classical dimensions of study in political sciences, they are rarely analysed from feminist perspectives

(Kantola and Lombardo 2017). A contribution of this dissertation is to analyse the three dimensions from a discursive perspective – the whole forming a discursive politics framework.

The first research question asked about how issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are discursively constructed in the EP by the political groups, both as supranational policy fields and vis-à-vis the EP's own practices. This is answered by the two first dimensions of the theoretical framework: policy and politics. The policy dimension is here conceptualised as policymaking, that is the role of the EP as a supranational policymaker. The politics dimension is here conceptualised as the internal practices of politics. In other words, it is the performance of politics via a set of formal and informal institutional practices, which is here the role of the EP as an institutional arena with its own internal gendered practices.

The second research question asked about what kind of impact the discursive constructions identified in the first research question have on the EP as a progressive and democratic supranational policymaker for gender equality. This is answered by the third dimension (i.e., polity). The polity dimension is here conceptualised as all elements that form a collective identity in the EP and in the EU, such as so-called EU values. In that sense, the EP is here regarded as a constitutive actor of the EU's polity by shaping its values, approach to democracy and gender equality.

Finally, all three dimensions are infused with discursive practices. Discursive methodologies are further developed below, but I argue here that discourses matter in all three dimensions (i.e., policy, politics, and polity). The interconnections of discursive practices within the policy, politics and polity are conceptualised within the framework 'discursive politics of...'. In turn, gendered violence and bodily rights are the selected empirical tools to analyse the status of gender equality in the EP as part of its policy, politics and polity. Put together, this makes "the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights."

In brief, this framework conceptualises the interconnections of the political groups' discursive practices on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, both when the EP acts as a supranational policymaker and when it seeks to regulate its own internal practices. Furthermore, this framework conceptualises such interconnections within the ongoing development of the EU as a polity. In other

words, it draws conclusion on the impact of such discursive practices on EU's democracy, its so-called values, and on the objective of gender equality.

First, I present the theoretical foundations at stake when analysing the discursive practices of the EP acting as a supranational policymaker, that is when issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are considered as supranational policy fields. Second, I present the theoretical foundations at stake when analysing the EP seeking to regulate its own internal gendered practices. That is, when issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are considered as internal practices of politics. Finally, I present the theoretical foundations at stake when analysing the discursive practices around gendered violence and bodily rights as constitutive elements of EU's polity, values, and democracy. I chose to start with policy down to polity to show that discourses on gendered violence and bodily rights often start at the policymaking level, which in turn shape our understanding of the polity.

3.1 DISCURSIVE PRACTICES AROUND GENDERED VIOLENCE AND BODILY RIGHTS

In this section, I explain the importance of studying the political groups' discursive practices around issues of gendered violence and bodily rights as supranational policy fields. This section corresponds to the policy dimension of the theoretical framework. I begin by reviewing the theoretical conceptualisations of gendered violence and bodily rights in the literature. Then, I explain the deconstructive approach to gender and how it is applied to discursive politics.

In the academic scholarship, various concepts were developed to make sense of issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in relation to politics, policymaking and democracy. Starting with gendered violence, some scholars have developed the concept of violence against women in politics to analyse the forms of violence that affect women in politics as a group (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020, 2016). They studied, for instance, whether it takes different forms in different political institutions (for a comparison of three parliaments, see Collier and Raney 2018) and during elections or on the Internet (Biroli 2016; Piscopo 2016; Bjarnegård 2018; Kuperberg 2021). This approach understands gender as a tool with which to analyse whether men and women are differently affected. Their findings typically stress that women, as a group, are indeed disproportionately and unequally targeted by violence

in politics (Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo 2019; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016, 2020). They argue that ‘the crucial difference [between violence against men and against women in politics] relates to the motive behind the violence, in particular whether it seeks to send a message to women – and to society – that woman as a group should not participate in politics’ (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2016; 468). However, despite some attempts to define violence against women in politics in intersectional ways (see, e.g., Kuperberg 2018), the concept was challenged theoretically for essentialising women as a homogeneous group and obscuring the gendered processes of policymaking (Shepherd 2008).

In turn, other concepts have included gender-based violence or gender violence, which indicates that not just women are affected by the violence (Merry 2008). These are sometimes preferred for their broader scope and inclusivity because they include gender-based violence against LGBTIQ+ people, as well as against men. However, violence against women and gender-based violence are often used interchangeably in the academic literature and International Organisations (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021). Furthermore, these concepts still lack the necessary tools to analyse the processes behind the construction of these issues, because they obscure the power relations at stake in representing, problematising and constructing the violence.

While both concepts of violence against women and gender(-based) violence regard such violence as embedded in unequal gender power relations, they assume the existence of unequal gender relations and begin from there. They do not deconstruct the coming-into-existence of such unequal gender relations, which is at the core of analysing gendered violence. These concepts are thus insufficient for the analysis pursued in this dissertation, in which discursive practices are regarded as gendered practices (Bacchi 2009). Regarding violence, such an endeavour is, in my understanding, better captured in the use of the term gendered violence, as inspired by deconstructive approaches.

A deconstructive approach to gender means that gender is an analytical tool used for studying the processes that maintain and reproduce gendered inequalities. Such processes are placed in the spotlight by an analysis of the discursive politics, which includes the discursive practices around policy issues. The focus is placed on the processes that led to a particular dominant discourse or a particular problematization, rather than on the consequences that practices and policies have

on different individuals in relation to their genders (Bacchi 2009). By using gender as a verb – gendering, gendered – it becomes a performance, something that individuals do through repetition, and shapes reality (Butler 1990; 2004; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). Against this background, it is possible to regard gendered violence and restrictions imposed on bodily rights as means of enforcing this reality and maintaining gender binaries as ‘natural or necessary’ (Butler 2004: 35). For instance, violence can be regarded as not only a result of or based on gender but also as a reproductive condition of gender (Shepherd 2008; Kantola, Norocel and Repo 2011). Therefore, to deconstruct gender is to analyse the processes that produce gendered subjects ‘rather than assuming differences and progressing from there’ (Shepherd, 2008: 50). It includes analysing the discursive politics that play into reproducing and maintaining but also challenging gendered inequalities.

In this scholarship, gender is understood as a polysemic and contested concept (Bacchi 2009, 2017; Verloo 2007; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009; Ferree 2012; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). In this dissertation, I contend that deconstructing gender means ‘theoriz[ing] gender as a discourse and a practice that is continuously contested and constructed in political debates’ (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, 35). Furthermore, I understand gender in an intersectional way, which means that the reproduction of inequalities is not restricted to gendered inequalities, nor is the reproduction of subjectivities restricted to gendered subjects. Systems of inequalities, such as race, ethnicity, class, disability and sexual orientation, work in intersection with one another (Crenshaw 1989).

Although restriction to abortion rights can be understood as a form of violence, their analytical relevance goes beyond the violence its restriction can generate. Therefore, the decision to add ‘bodily rights’ to ‘gendered violence’ is not exclusionary but rather stress the importance to study discourses on abortion rights for democracy, always. Several terms are used in the literature to refer to abortion rights. They include ‘reproductive rights’, ‘sexual health and reproductive rights’, ‘reproductive justice’, ‘bodily integrity’, ‘abortion rights’ or ‘bodily rights.’ To refer to abortion, I chose to use the term ‘bodily rights’ because it is theorised in the literature in connection with other concepts, such as citizenship, democracy, self-determination and autonomy (Sümer and Eslen-Ziya 2017; Outshoorn 2015, 2011). Within the context of this dissertation, the concept of ‘bodily rights’ is particularly adequate because it complements ‘gendered violence’ – in the sense that for instance

sexual harassment can be understood both as a form of gendered violence and an infringement to bodily rights.

As stated above, it is important to regard abortion rights in connection with democracy and citizenship rights when studying the EP as a democratic policymaker (Siim and Mokre 2021). In particular, the connection between abortion rights and citizenship emphasizes the fact that the restriction of abortion rights often results from state control. Nevertheless, I agree with the arguments developed in the reproductive justice literature, according to which claims to abortion rights are embedded in unequal social structures and full access to abortion services does not only depend on their legality (Król and Pustulka 2018; Htun and Weldon 2018). Various structural conditions exist that limit the reality of formal choice (Saurette and Gordon 2018). Reproductive justice highlights a vision of justice in which the formal rights to choose to reproduce or not to reproduce are protected (Luna 2020).

Like gendered violence, scholars have applied a deconstructive approach to bodily rights. They have argued that discourses on abortion issues have an effect beyond the scope of reproduction. A deconstructive approach to abortion rights, therefore, suggests its analysis is relevant from a democratic perspective even when it is not threatened of restriction. Indeed, abortion politics were described in some contexts as a ‘coded discourse’ that aims to shape the state, its obligations, the rule of law and the scope of protection for fundamental freedom and civil rights (Zielińska 2000, 24; see also Kramer 2009). In other words, discursive politics of bodily rights are a means of enacting social and political transformation beyond the scope of reproduction, they shape a collective identity by marking distinction with others. Thus, discursive practices are central to abortion politics. In fact, scholars talk about ‘abortion politics’ instead of ‘abortion rights’ to stress the fact that rights are not given or owned but, rather, continuously debated, contested, defended and resisted in a discursive process that aims to reframe the issue according to a particular (new) political context or purpose (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Likewise, the concept of the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights also seeks to capture the idea that these issues are continuously debated, contested, defended and resisted. In other words, their meaning is reinterpreted via discursive practices in an ongoing manner, with consequences on the EP as a progressive and democratic supranational policymaker for gender equality.

3.2 INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AROUND GENDERED VIOLENCE AND BODILY RIGHTS

As seen above, the theoretical framework (the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights) includes an analysis of gendered violence and bodily rights as supranational policy fields by exploring the processes of meaning-attribution via political groups' discursive practices. This section adds the dimension of politics, in which the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are addressed as internal institutional practices. A key contribution of this dissertation is to contrast an examination of the discursive practices at stake when the EP acts as a supranational policymaker and those at stake when the EP seeks to regulate its own practices. Therefore, the discursive practices of political groups around issues of gendered violence and bodily rights as policy fields are placed in contrast with the institutional practices (which also includes discursive practices). This provides a fuller account of the EP as a supranational policymaker for gendered violence and bodily rights and, by extension, gender equality. As a result, the dissertation argues that the pursuit of gender equality at the supranational level is undermined when the institution in charge of delivering policies on gendered violence and bodily rights is itself reproducing internal unequal gendered practices (i.e., sexual harassment).

In studying institutional practices, theories of feminist institutionalism (FI) are important tools. They combine new institutional theories with a gender perspective to explain the gendered arrangements of institutions, the gendered effects of institutions, the gendered mechanisms behind institutional continuity and change and the impact of gendered actors on institutions (Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010; Waylen 2017; Lowndes 2020). In sum, they provide important tools via which to analyse the European Parliament as an institutional arena with its own internal gendered practices.

In this scholarship, institutions are not regarded as neutral but, rather, as infused with gendered practices and composed of gendered actors. A key contribution of FI scholars is highlighting the complex interplay between formal institutions – such as codified rules and procedures – and informal institutions – such as customary practices and ways of doing – in shaping institutions (Chappell and Waylen 2013). Formal and informal institutions are key concepts in understanding the mechanisms that block, reverse, or support progressive gender reform in a setting such as the EP (Mackay 2014; Waylen 2014, 2017). In fact, FI

scholars have demonstrated that an analysis of both formal and informal institutions can shed light on processes of institutional continuity and change (Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010; Waylen 2017; Lowndes 2020).

Furthermore, this dissertation regards institutions as dynamic and fluid (Bacchi and Rönblom 2014) in the sense that discourse always matters in the process of institutional changes and continuity (Erikson 2019). Therefore, I contend that theories of FI are strengthened when combined with an analysis of discourses because it sheds light on the effect of discursive practices on institutional stability, resistance, and change. In other words, analysing the discursive practices at play within a political institution like the EP, and the discursive context in which they are embedded, sheds light on the institutional practices that maintain gendered inequalities, on the forms of resistance to more gender equal measures and on the possible institutional solutions to gendered inequalities.

For instance, FI theories were extensively used in this dissertation to analyse the EP's institutional response to internal incidents of sexual harassment. In general, the global #MeToo campaign generated scholarly interest in studying parliaments as particular workplaces (Erikson and Josefsson 2019) within which sexual harassment is widespread (Collier and Raney 2018; Krook 2018). Against this background, scholars sought to identify the possibilities for institutional changes in parliament to prevent sexual harassment and the efficacy of newly introduced measures. For instance, new measures have consisted in introducing a code of conduct against sexual harassment (Collier and Raney 2018). This kind of institutional change is theoretically conceptualised around the four concepts of displacement, layering, drift and conversion (Waylen 2014). Displacement corresponds to the creation of new rules to replace old ones, layering corresponds to the creation of new rules on top of old ones (i.e., code of conduct), drift corresponds to attributing a new meaning to existing rules after changes in the institutional environment, and conversion corresponds to the strategic use of ambiguity in the meaning of existing rules to alter their use (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, 101; Waylen 2014, 219). A deconstructive, discursive approach to FI studies the possibilities for institutional change upstream, that is, the power struggles over possible institutional solutions.

Furthermore, FI theories allowed an analytical shift from regarding the EP as a supranational policymaker for gender equality to regarding it as an institutional

arena with its own internal gendered practices. More specifically, my co-author Johanna Kantola and I used FI theories to understand the dynamics of institutional change in the EP toward more gender-equal institutions. We analysed the discursive mechanisms behind the issue of sexual harassment within the EP that led to institutional reform or resistance. In doing so, we stressed the patchy institutional response and the difficulty of changing institutions described as ‘good’ (see Sections 5.3 and 6). Our contribution is therefore to show that the discursive politics around sexual harassment in the EP, including the forms of resistance and reluctance to meaningful change, limit what can be reformed and reproduce inequalities.

Moreover, FI theories are also used to analyse the formal and informal EP institutions that enabled or blocked the MeTooEP campaign, an internal staff-led mobilisation against sexual harassment in the EP. For this purpose, key EP formal and informal institutions relevant to sexual harassment were identified and analysed (Chappell and Waylen 2013). They included, for instance, the formal EP Anti-harassment Committee and the informal ‘hire and fire’ practice (see Sections 5.4 and 6).

Thus, FI complements the theoretical framework by providing the tools to study the EP institutional practices in relation to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Here, discursive practices are not excluded from institutional practices, they are a part of them. This section presented the second dimension of the discursive politics framework, that is the institutional arena dimension in which the EP is regarded as having its own internal gendered practices in the performance of politics. It complements the first dimension, in which the EP is regarded as a supranational policymaker and thus contrast the ways in which issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are discursively constructed by the political groups when dealt with as supranational policy fields or as own internal practices. The following section brings the third dimension into the discussion by assessing the EP as a constitutive actor of the EU’s polity, including the so-called EU’s democratic values.

3.3 GENDERED VIOLENCE AND BODILY RIGHTS AS CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE POLITY

In this section, I bring together the discursive and institutional practices around issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, both as supranational policy fields and as internal gendered practices, to highlight their place in the construction of the EU as a polity. Here, concepts of EU democratic values are of particular importance because the EP is regarded as a constitutive actor of values of democracy and gender equality.

The construction of the EU via processes of integration has included the development of new rights and values, such as human rights and gender equality. According to some constructivist scholars, the construction of fundamental rights and gender equality as new legitimate values and objectives of the EU is the result of narratives that have shaped particular myths (MacRae 2010; Smismans 2010). In this literature, a political myth can be defined as “a narrative that is (...) widely appropriated as a shared belief of the foundational principles of a polity...” (Smismans 2010, 46). It becomes a marker of the polity, a constitutive element of its collective identity. Furthermore it “can be used as a tool by elites (...) to confer legitimacy on an institution...” (Macrae 2010, 156). In that sense, it is used instrumentally to sustain and strengthen the role of a political institution, such as the European Parliament.

However, I think the term ‘myth’ underestimates the realities of EU integration and the massive development of binding and non-binding laws and principles that have shaped both the EU and its gender equality policy apparatus. Nonetheless, I contend with the argument that the development of gender equality in the EU primarily had a normative role. That is, sometimes serving other ends than enhancing equalities. Indeed, the gender equality norm helped mark boundaries with non-EU countries by demarcating the EU’s own identity vis-à-vis others and promoted a certain kind of economic market (Galligan and Clavero 2012; Woodward and Van der Vleuten 2014; David and Guerrina 2013; Kantola 2010). Regarding the European Parliament, this dissertation’s very first sentence relays the assumption that it is “a champion for gender equality” (Locher 2012, 68). Yet, scholars have pointed out that despite the existence of a substantive support for gender equality policy in the EP, the unharmonized support across political groups and the presence of a strong opposition suggest that the pursuit of gender equality objectives in the

EU relies on few committed individuals (van der Vleuten 2019), rather than on a structural, institutionalised commitment around shared values.

A contribution of this dissertation is to show that the gender equality norm is used in the EP to create the right image. The EP self-represents as a champion for gender equality. In turn, this discourse of excellence produces the image of a 'good institution' discourse and constitutes a barrier to recognizing the existence of internal practices of gendered violence (i.e., sexual harassment), or to address internal forms of opposition to gender equality.

Indeed, an important aspect of studying the EP as a constitutive actor of so-called EU's democratic values is the increasing visibility of forms of opposition to gender equality amongst MEPs and political groups. Theories of opposition to gender equality provides tools to analyse the direct and indirect strategies of opposition and helps deconstruct the image of the EP as a strong, unified promoter of gender equality. Opposition to gendered violence and bodily rights at the supranational level is widespread and takes shape via direct and indirect strategies (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). This dissertation shows that this opposition is visible both when the EP acts as a supranational policymaker and when it deals with own internal practices. A key contribution is to read this opposition as an attempt to reinterpret the EU's democratic values and to reshape the polity. It also has a direct impact on the EP's ability to pursue gender equality objectives in a meaningful way.

Therefore, it is important to analyse the ways in which anti-gender actors shape the EP's institutional environment by opposing the supranational norm of gender equality. In this regard, gender and politics scholars developed an extensive body of literature theorising the forms of opposition to gender equality. They demonstrate that anti-gender movements in Europe are posing a serious threat to the protection and expansion of the supranational norm of gender equality (Kováts 2017; Kováts and Põim 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). As disputed concepts, the meanings of 'gender' and 'gender equality' are continually debated, constructed and resisted (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). Opposition emerges in the struggle over the attribution of meaning to 'gender' and 'gender equality' (Roggeband and Krizsan 2020) via attempts to underplay their relevance in policymaking. In this discursive struggle, the meaning of gender equality can be stretched, bent and fixed in as many ways as necessary to match a particular political objective (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). For instance, indirect

opposition to gender equality can take the form of bending the meaning of ‘gender equality’ toward subsidiarity arguments, which has the effect of delegitimising gender equality policymaking at the supranational level (Kantola and Lombardo 2021), as further developed in Section 6.3 below. A direct form of opposition to gender equality can take the form of a gender ideology rhetoric, in which gender equality is depicted as a dangerous norm and gender equality supporters are depicted as ideologues (Korolczuk 2020; Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

A more recent development in the literature consists of linking forms of opposition to gender equality, such as policy dismantlement, and the erosion of democracy. Empirically, scholars have shown that the opposition to gender equality norms is stronger in states where democracy is threatened (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018), that is, when nationalism and sovereignty become key political projects. Against this empirical background, scholars theoretically developed the idea that backlashes against gender equality are early warning signs of wider democratic backsliding trends (Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2018). In this regard, gender and politics scholars make an important contribution to EU (dis)integration theories (Lombardo and Kantola 2019).

This dissertation builds on this scholarship for analysing supranational forms of opposition to gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP (as part of the discursive politics framework) and consider the opposition as an attempt to reshape the polity by reframing so-called EU’s democratic values. In that sense, the norm of gender equality is used in an instrumental way, via opposing it, to reinterpret the EU as a polity. More specifically, I applied theories of opposition to gender equality to highlight the direct and indirect strategies used by anti-gender actors in the EP to contest issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Opposition occurred when issues of gendered violence and bodily rights were debated as both supranational policy fields and internal practices. For instance, direct and indirect opposition to gender equality were used in discourse to oppose the policy development of a right to abortion in the EU and resist internal institutional reforms in relation to sexual harassment. Finally, these theories provide tools with which to analyse the impact of opposition on gender equality as a supranational norm, on the EP as a supranational policymaker and on the EU as a supranational polity (see Section 6.3). The findings show that opposition to gender equality, like the norm gender equality itself, can be

used in an instrumental way to follow a certain political agenda. In the next section, I turn to presenting the dissertation's research design.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This dissertation is an article-based dissertation comprised of four articles. The dissertation is part of a broader research project, the EUGenDem project, analysing the gendered policies and practices of the European Parliament's political groups. The project has influenced the research design of this dissertation by providing a significant amount of data on the EP's political groups' gendered policies and practices. This has, for instance, shaped the perspective of this dissertation in the sense that it considers the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights by political groups. Nonetheless, to approach gender equality via issues of gendered violence and bodily rights is the dissertation's own choice.

This section will first develop the method and methodology considerations in relation to studying the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights. Then, it will present the research material. Then, it will explain the method of analysing "politics as discursively produced" (Rönneblom 2009, 118) via software for qualitative data analysis, AtlasTi. Finally, it will consider the researcher's positionality, the ethical commitments involved and research reliability.

4.1 METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

In research, theories of knowledge help researchers make sense of their research questions, theories and data (Yanow 2012). A feminist research ethics suggests that the way in which our research produces knowledge 'must be critically assessed and clearly exposed during the research project' (Ackerly and True 2020). In this dissertation, knowledge is understood as constructed (Yanow 2006), which means that the relevant methodologies to produce and analyse such knowledge are, for instance, interpretivist and constructivist. An interpretivist approach relies on the belief that an analysis of human actions and practices is possible via elucidating the meanings that actors attribute to actions, practices and the institutional environment in which they operate (Bevir 2006, 283). Furthermore, post-structuralist approaches have stressed the importance and omnipresence of power relations in the attribution

of meanings to things (Foucault 1972, 1980). This has meant that, when interpreting processes of meaning-attribution, the researcher must analyse whether these processes are responsible for the construction and reproduction of certain social realities, including unequal power structures.

Methodologist scholars have argued that the attribution of meanings to actions, practices and the institutional environment are best analysed in the narrative of relevant actors, which is, in turn, best analysed via a qualitative toolkit (Bevir 2006). This suggests a discourse-sensitive methodological approach (Lindekilde 2014). Although various types of discourse analysis exist (see Phillips and Hardy 2002 for an overview), my understanding suggests that this term refers to analysing the various discursive practices of actors when they attribute meaning to their social world, institutional environment, actions and practices (Lindekilde 2014). In other words, in this dissertation, the idea is to analyse how actors in the European Parliament use various discursive practices to make sense of their actions as supranational policymakers or members of an institution, as well as to make sense of their institutional environment. Furthermore, such a methodology must acknowledge the broader discursive environment in which individual discursive practices are embedded (Ferre et al. 2002). Therefore, I understand the key site of a discursive analysis as being ‘the discursive battles over meaning and [the] definition of reality’ (Lindekilde 2014, 196), which play out between various actors, as well as the constraint imposed by their institutional discursive environment. Within this discursive battle, power is omnipresent and performative (Foucault 1972, 1980).

In other words, discourses play an important role in maintaining, challenging and transforming (unequal) power relations within a given institution (Lindekilde 2014, 206). In gender and politics scholarship, this has meant regarding social structures, such as gendered inequalities, as cemented by power relations (Kantola and Lombardo 2017). Therefore, analysing the discursive layers embedded in institutions can help in understanding the processes through which power cements these institutions the way they are (ibid.). In this regard, discursive practices influence what can be said, achieved and reformed in an institution (Bacchi 2009; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009).

This dissertation focuses on the political groups’ discourses because they highlight the different interpretation of gendered violence and bodily right issues, the different shape of resistance and support to gender equality, the possibilities for

institutional change, the possibilities, and limits to advance gender equality as a policy field and as an internal practice. Finally, discourses highlight the different perceptions of the polity and the different interpretation of EU's democratic values. Their analysis matter because discourses have a direct impact on what problematic gain relevance and what solutions are selected. Analysing discourses also shed lights on what problems and solutions were ignored, silenced and made invisible.

These methodological underpinnings have motivated my choice of methods, namely analysing the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP via interviewing methods and documentary research methods, as explained below.

4.2 RESEARCH MATERIAL

Following the methodological perspectives described above, I now turn to presenting the research material produced for this dissertation. I agree with the epistemological understanding that data cannot be objectively collected but, rather, 'co-created through the power of epistemology, attending to boundaries and intersectionality, relationships, and the situatedness of the researcher and research-participant' (Ackerly and True 2020: 152). This has several consequences for the research design. First, it consists of understanding data as co-produced with the research participants (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Second, it invites researchers to think about how meaning is created via research and how one's research depends on one's own theoretical engagement (Gilgun and McLeod 1999; Presser 2005). To talk about the production of or generation of data often implies a theoretical engagement with social constructivism and poststructuralism, as well as a commitment to reflect on how the politics of knowledge influence the content and shape of the data.

Furthermore, methods are tools to produce data and translate, interpret and analyse them (Ackerly and True 2020: 155). Within a constructivist, interpretivist and discursive-inspired methodological approach, discourses correspond to 'anything that is written [or that] can be translated into text' (Lindekilde 2014, 209). This dissertation produced data via 'texts' that 'are sampled intentionally on the basis of being particularly informative vis-à-vis the discourse of interest' (Lindekilde 2014, 211). I used documentary research and interviews to produce the data that would

provide me with the relevant information on the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP (see Table 1). The documentary research produced data to analyse the PG's discursive practices, such as speeches in plenary debates and amendments to policy reports, as well as the EP's institutional practices, such as the EP rules on procedures and PGs' statutes. Interviews, on the other hand, are typically regarded as a qualitative method consisting of a conversation between the researcher and the participants, one aimed at gaining information and valuable insights for research purposes (Berg 2004). Interviews were an important addition to documentary research because they nuanced statements made in plenary debates, which are often intended to speak to the domestic electorate (Brack 2018). Furthermore, the interviewees were experts on the EP as an institution, which allowed them to provide valuable information on institutional practices.

Table 1. Overview of the research material

DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH					
Plenary/Committee level		Political Groups level	European Parliament level	Others	
Debates (N = 18) Written/oral intervention in debates (N = 884) Amendments (N = 503)		Press releases Statutes	Rules of Procedures Reports/ resolutions	MeTooEP blog MeTooEP twitter account MeTooEP press conferences MeTooEP recorded appearances	
INTERVIEWS					
Political groups	MEP (F)	MEP (M)	Staff (F)	Staff (M)	Total
EPP	10	4	4	1	19
S&D	10	6	11	3	30
ALDE/Renew	4	2	5	5	16
Greens-EFA	8	2	6	2	18
GUE/NGL	2	2	3	6	13
ECR	2	5	-	2	9
EFDD/NI	4	6	-	2	12
ENF/ID	1	4	-	3	8
Other	-	-	5	5	10
Total	41	31	34	29	135

4.2.1 DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH

First, the research material consists of important documentary research on the European Parliament's website. Most parliamentary activity is translated into documents as part of the EP's commitment to transparency. These documents are publicly available on the EP's website. Among them, I mostly used transcriptions of plenary and committee debates, including video recordings. Depending on each article's scope and aim, the material either included the transcription of debates at the plenary level only or at the plenary and committee levels. Indeed, because key policy-formation negotiations occurred at the committee level (Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet. 2022), it was necessary to include committee-level debates in some cases. Overall, more than 884 oral and written interventions in debates were analysed as part of this dissertation. Debates on gendered violence and bodily rights, both at the plenary and committee levels, were found via a keyword search on the EP's Public Register of Document. Keywords included, for instance, 'violence against women', 'Istanbul Convention', 'sexual harassment' and 'abortion'. The selection of debates respected a selected timeframe and related to internal EU affairs exclusively. For instance, debates on ending female genital mutilation in the world were not selected despite their relevance to gendered violence and bodily rights because they fall outside the research objective's scope. One particularity of the European Parliament is that it counts 24 official languages and MEPs often use their native language during plenary debates. The EP publishes documents called 'Verbatim Reports of Proceedings', in which each speech is translated into English. However, because it usually takes time before these documents are available online, I often had to rely on the immediate interpretations of the official EP translating services live during debates, thus requiring transcription work.

The research material produced via documentary research also included amendments to selected reports on gendered violence and bodily rights. Amendments can be submitted in committees by a single MEP or a group of MEPs or in the name of the group. For instance, one of the articles in this dissertation that deals with a right to abortion in the EU included an analysis of the 503 amendments on the Matic resolution on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU because one research objective was to trace the parliamentary process of this specific resolution. Finally, the supplementary material included documents relevant to the MeTooEP campaign, an internal staff-led mobilization against sexual harassment;

the political groups (i.e., press releases and group statutes) and the European Parliament (i.e., reports/resolutions, the rule of procedures).

4.2.2 INTERVIEWS

Beyond documents available online, the research material consisted of interviews with supranational actors in the European Parliament. The interview dataset for this dissertation relies on the EUGenDem project, of which ten interviews were conducted by me.

The EUGenDem project analysed the gendered practices and policies of the EP's political groups via interviewing and ethnographic methods. With other members of the research team, I participated in the development of the interview questionnaires and strategies of analysis on AtlasTi (see Section 4.4). This dataset is extensively used in the articles of the dissertation. Beyond its relevance to the sub-issues at stake in this dissertation (i.e., the EU's ratification to the Istanbul Convention, a right to abortion in the EU and sexual harassment in the EP), the project interview dataset helped me understand the EP's institutional structure and context, the policymaking processes, the levels and hierarchies of interactions, and the gendered issues of parliamentary work.

The interviews included questions directly relevant to gendered violence and bodily rights. Indeed, working in teams with my EUGenDem colleagues meant that we could communicate with one another regarding what questions were relevant to ask. For instance, issues of gendered violence and bodily rights were integrated into the project's interview questionnaire via questions related to sexual harassment and the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Sometimes, the issues arose spontaneously when interviewees were asked about internal disagreements in and among groups in relation to gender equality policies (i.e., controversy over abortion issues).

The interview material consists of the 135 interviews conducted by my colleagues and I as part of the project (see Table 1 for an overview of the EUGenDem interview dataset). The interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2021 in Brussels and Strasbourg, and then online following the travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was able to make use of the 135 interviews in a meaningful and systematic way because I took part in the preliminary work leading

to the interviews, including recruiting participants and drafting questionnaires, and the code work for analysing them, including creating a code list on AtlasTi. I felt familiar with the interview material despite not having conducted most of the interviews myself. Nonetheless, my use of the EUGenDem interview dataset had some pitfalls in that the interviews were conducted and analysed by six researchers, with different positionalities and lenses. As a team, we attempted to overcome this methodological flaw by systematically making use of memos (Saldaña 2015) in the form of a research diary. Via the diaries, we monitored and shared our thoughts while coding the material. This ensured consistency in the coding teamwork. Because issues of interview methods and sampling strategies regarding the EUGenDem project are addressed elsewhere (Kantola 2022; Miller 2022), here, I will focus on addressing those issues regarding the interview I conducted.

The ten interviews conducted by me were comprised of two MEPs, from the EPP and Greens/EFA groups; five accredited parliamentary assistants, including one who was interviewed twice, from the S&D, ALDE and GUE-NGL groups, and two policy advisors from the Greens/EFA (see Table 2 for an overview of the ten interviews conducted by me). Groups on the center-left (ALDE, S&D and GUE-NGL) tend to be more active on gender equality issues (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021), which explains their greater involvement in gendered violence and bodily rights issues, as well as their willingness to talk about them. Therefore, key informants from these groups were easier to recruit for interviews. I targeted actors in the EP that possessed the relevant information and insights for my research. Scholars have defined such research participants as ‘elites’ because they are ‘those with close proximity to power or policymaking’ (Lilleker 2003, 207). However, it is questionable whether there is a difference between ‘elite interview’ or ‘expert interview’ (Bogner, Littig and Menz 2009) when an ‘expert’ is understood as knowledgeable. Interviewing ‘elites’ also means interviewing policy experts and experts on the complex institution within which they operate. To recruit participants, I used convenience sampling, that is, including ‘pretty much whomever [I could] get’ (Weiss 1994, 24), provided that their knowledge of the issue would give me key insight. All participants were asked about other potential key informants they could recommend to allow for a snowball sampling strategy (Weiss 1994).

Table 2. Overview of the ten interviews conducted by me

Overview of the ten interviews				
Gender	Position	Political Group	Length in minutes (approximately)	Other remarks
F	MEP	EPP	20	Phone interview
F	MEP	Greens/EFA	20	Recording failed
F	Staff	S&D	40	Phone interview
F	Staff	S&D	45	Bar/snack in EP
F	Staff	S&D	40	Bar/snack in EP
F	Staff	S&D	40	EP corridors
F	Staff	ALDE	20	Hand recorded
M	Staff	GUE-NGL	60	In office
F	Staff	Greens/EFA	40	Phone interview
F	Staff	Greens/EFA	40	Declined recording

Because the dissertation follows constructivist and interpretative methodologies and the research participants were knowledgeable on both the issues (i.e., gendered violence and bodily rights) and the institution (i.e., the European Parliament), I chose to perform in-depth interviews (Soss 2006). The format was conversational, with a semi-structured questionnaire and open-ended questions. Because the research aim is not to draw a comparison between interviews, the questions were tailored according to each participant's field of expertise. This required 'ultra-important' preparatory work to learn about the interviewees' background and involvement in parliamentary activity beforehand (Lilleker 2003, 210).

The sampling strategy (convenience sampling of key informants) and the conversational format of in-depth interviews entail methodological pitfalls. They do not allow drawing conclusion about generalisations, comparative conclusions or the precise assessment of frequencies (Soss 2006, 139). However, such pitfalls were balanced by the large interview dataset of the EUGenDem project (N = 135), which provided a fairer representation of the entire EP. Furthermore, because the research objectives are to analyse the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP, in-depth interviews with key informants, combined with a large pool of interviews on the gendered policies and practices in the EP, were the most suitable choice for a method.

These ten interviews are part of the EUGenDem project interview dataset. Therefore, they followed similar ethical guidelines. The EUGenDem project received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region in view of conducting interviews. Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, participants were promised anonymity and informed of their right to withdraw via consent form (see Annex I). Participants were also given information about the research project (see Annex II). The purpose of the research and the usage of data for research publications and dissemination were clearly defined in invitation emails. In addition, participants were informed that the data would be safely stored at Tampere University network storage. Respecting the anonymity of the participants was a serious concern for us in the project, which has meant evaluating the risk of identification throughout the research process. Sometimes, we were not able 'to add that "golden" quote' into our research articles because doing so would have allowed the identification of the participant (Chappell 2021, 132).

Other limitation includes the fact that some interview transcripts were recorded by hand, sometimes in unsuitable and loud premises (see Table 2), which limited their accuracy (see, for instance, Cowley 2021). Nonetheless, such interviews were used for insights and background information (Chappell 2021), including the broader discursive and institutional environment in the EP. Furthermore, scholars interviewing elites have highlighted the challenges of accessing knowledge in institutions (Holmes et al. 2019). These challenges include being aware of the possibility of only eliciting ‘political talk’ because ‘politicians are used to evading difficult questions’ (Cowley 2021, 3). These limitations have stressed the importance of drawing ‘conclusions with the appropriate dose of caution and plenty of caveats’ (Cowley 2021, 15). Other limitations of conducting interviews have included the lack of opportunities to build trust with interview participants during ‘fly in fly out’ interviews (Chappell 2021, 135). In that sense, some dynamics are only visible via ethnographic methods, such as participant observation (Brown 2018; Miller 2022).

4.3 CODING AND ANALYSING THE DATA USING ATLAS.TI

Having explained above how the data were produced via documentary research and interviewing methods, following constructivist, interpretive and discourse-inspired methodologies, I now turn to explain how the data were analysed.

In qualitative data analysis, ‘analysis does not begin when the researcher has finished collecting the data’; it is, rather, an ongoing process (Spencer et al. 2014, 276). In that sense, the ways in which the researcher labels the data are an ongoing process as well. I used codes to conduct the analysis of the political groups’ discourses on gendered violence and bodily rights. I approached the produced data as a ‘text’ comprising of a myriad of discursive practices. I analysed these discursive practices as strategies to either support or oppose gender equality. In the literature, codes are described as useful tools to label the data in ways that best capture their essential meaning and address the research questions (Spencer et al. 2014). Coding is both a way to organise the data and to interpret them, although the two are intertwined (Tesch 1990). The development of a coding framework in itself is influenced by the researcher’s positionality, theoretical assumptions and epistemology. This necessarily limits the utilisation of coding framework in research. For more on how positionality affects the lens through which I read the data, see section 4.4 below.

For this dissertation, the data were coded in Atlas.Ti, a software program for qualitative data analysis. First, a code list was created in a deductive fashion, prior to coding the data, based on prior knowledge about conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, 32). However, because codes are not ‘set in stone’ and can be adjusted based on observations drawn from the data in an inductive fashion (*ibid.*), the code list was often revised. All the data described in Section 4.2 were analysed on Atlas.Ti.

In practical terms, this meant conducting a close reading of the data and labelling the text by segments with different codes, which, in turn, enabled to explore and identify emerging themes and patterns, including patterns of strategies. Of particular importance to my analytical process, Atlas.Ti allows the creation of ‘networks’ between codes, which immediately highlights connections between issues, type of definition attributed to issues, nature of conflict and values attached to it. For instance, after coding a debate on EU’s ratification to the Istanbul Convention with a coding framework that included different types of direct and indirect strategies of opposition, forms of support, meaning attributed to the content of norms and the traditional or progressive values attached to the assessment of ratification, I could create a network on Atlas.Ti that would map connections between direct forms of opposition to the Convention (i.e., via the rhetoric of gender ideology), delegitimization of the Convention’s content (i.e., the text carries an ideology) and strong attachment to conservative traditional values.

Due to the article-based nature of this dissertation, there is not a single code list for the entire dissertation. Rather, I developed a code list for each article so as to best address each article’s research questions and objectives. Furthermore, because the data include the large interview dataset of the research project, the interview data used in this dissertation were coded twice: first as part of an interactive coding process with the other members of the EUGenDem project and second as part of the analysis for each article. For example, the EUGenDem code list contained codes such as ‘Opposition to gender equality’, ‘Istanbul Convention’ and ‘Sexual harassment’, which were first retrieved and then recoded with a separate code list customised for each article. This ensured I had a strong sense of familiarity with the data. Furthermore, my direct access to the EUGenDem interview dataset provided me with the ‘wider “coding context”’ (Spencer et al. 2014, 290) and the full interview transcript, thus avoiding interpreting the data out of context.

Both the production of the data and their coding on Atlas.Ti were influenced by the researcher's own positionality, as further developed below.

4.4 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY, ETHICAL COMMITMENTS AND RESEARCH RELIABILITY

An important aspect of research is considering the ways in which the researcher's positionality influences the research design. In turn, positionality influences ethical commitments and research reliability.

Feminist-informed research includes a commitment to self-reflection in the sense that researchers 'need to be aware of how [their] own basket of privileges and experiences conditions [their] knowledge and research' (Ackerly and True 2020, 21). Likewise, the research must be attentive to 'the fact that any situation, person or research phenomena can be understood only in terms of intersecting and overlapping contexts and social forces such as race, age, gender, sexuality, income, nationality, historical moment, among many others' (Ackerly and True 2020, 27). For this dissertation, these have meant being aware of the relationships of power existing within epistemologies and theories, between the researcher and the research participants and within the European Parliament as an institution.

In that sense, my demographic and socio-economic background, as well as lived experiences, shape the lens through which I see the world and approach research. In turn, this lens creates biases. For instance, my understanding of the EU is influenced by my nationality (France), the role of my home country within the EU, France's universalistic approach to right and equality, and finally, by my positive experience within the EU (Erasmus). Throughout the research for this dissertation, I tried to mitigate this ethnocentric western bias by applying a critical theoretical lens to my inquiry (i.e., intersectionality and reproductive justice) and by presenting my theoretical assumptions to other researchers with different lenses. Furthermore, I am a white, straight, middle-class, able-bodied women, French and English speaking, highly educated, familiar with international settings and without personal experience of gendered violence. These are the few elements that shape and limit my understanding of a given matter. Being surrounded by a community of honest researchers with different background has helped me stay aware of my epistemological privileges and biases.

During the interview process, my positionality of outsider (Sarikakis 2003) has meant that I was dependent on the interviewee to provide me access to the premises of the European Parliament, which are otherwise restricted. Simultaneously, most of my interviewees had identities similar to mine. Indeed, I interviewed mostly women around my age with university backgrounds similar to my own, and most were relatively implicated in gender equality work. For instance, I did not interview parliamentary actors opposing gender equality. Nonetheless, anti-gender actors were interviewed in the EUGenDem project, and these data were used in the dissertation. Issues related to the data collection for the EUGenDem project are addressed elsewhere (Miller 2021, 2022). Furthermore, I felt as if sharing the same nationality as interviewees was sometimes an important factor, especially at the supranational level, where nationality becomes a common denominator. Therefore, I think my being French facilitated my access to French parliamentary actors, and in total, five interviews were conducted in French. However, this factor was no guarantee, as one interview candidate with whom I had a phone call scheduled never answered or called on the agreed schedule. Furthermore, the predominance of French interviewees in the interview dataset I conducted was balanced in the EUGenDem project dataset by other nationalities.

The core of qualitative study is the examination of meanings channelled through discursive practices, as well as how they are constructed and attributed to things by different actors (Gibson and Brown 2009; Tesch 1990). Therefore, as with other types of research, the nature of constructivist and interpretive study sets boundaries on its reliability and validity, that is, ‘the very act of claiming to know something’ (Yanow 2006, 8). The aim of this research is not to make any claims about universal truth or generalisability but, rather, to study the accounts of actors regarding their actions, their intentions, their interpretations of others’ actions and how they make sense of the world and their institutional context (Yanow 2006, 9).

Many debates exist over the replicability of qualitative study findings (Lewis et al. 2014). Some have argued that, in qualitative research, replicability can be achieved via a detailed and transparent account of the research processes that have led to the findings (Seale 1999). In this dissertation, efforts toward transparency have included the thorough documentation of the research process, for instance, via memos and interview notes (Miles and Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2015).

Another ethical commitment for good research I followed is that of acknowledging my intellectual debt to previous knowledge by citing a broad literature of authors who have had a significant influence on my thinking (Ackerly and True 2020, 258). For instance, I have attempted, when the word count limit of published articles made it possible, to cite authors with their first name to highlight the role of women scholars in building that knowledge.

5 ARTICLES

In this section, I will present the four articles in detail. The dissertation consists of three published peer-reviewed research articles, including one co-authored piece with Professor Johanna Kantola (Article III), and one currently under review (see Table 3). The order in which the articles are presented in the following section is not chronological. Instead, the order was selected for its consistency in answering the dissertation's research questions and best demonstrating the mismatch between the EP's discursive practices and institutional practices in relation to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights.

Table 3. Overview of the four articles and their research questions

OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR ARTICLES AND THEIR RESEARCH QUESTIONS			
	Journals	Titles	Research questions
Article I	International Feminist Journal of Politics	Norm under fire: support for and opposition to the European Union's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament	How are support and opposition to EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention constructed discursively by MEPs? What are the effects of this cleavage on ratification and gender equality in the EP?
Article II	Journal of Common Market Studies	United in crisis: abortion politics in the European Parliament and political groups' dispute over EU values	How is a right to abortion in the EU constructed by political groups? Second, how are EU values instrumentally used to frame support for or opposition to the right? Third, what impact do these have on supranational gender-equality policymaking?
Article III	Social and Politics	Gender, violence and political institutions: struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament	How is sexual harassment discursively constructed as a problem in the EP by different actors? How do those constructions shape the solutions that are put forward by parliamentary actors? What are the effects of these discourses for institutional changes in the Parliament?
Article IV	European Journal of Women's Studies	Mobilization against sexual harassment in the European parliament: the MeTooEP campaign	How did MeTooEP actors shape the campaign within the EP and with what consequences on the campaign and themselves? How did the EP institutional bodies and rules constraint and/or empower the campaign?

5.1 NORM UNDER FIRE: SUPPORT FOR AND OPPOSITION TO THE EU'S RATIFICATION OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Article I was published in the academic peer-reviewed *International Feminist Journal of Politics* in February 2022. The article deals with the forms of support for and opposition to the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence in the European Parliament, with a particular focus on similarities and differences between and within political groups.

This article brings a new perspective on the discursive politics of the contestation of the supranational global norm of ending violence against women via gender equality's objectives. In this article, I engaged with scholarly debates on the conceptualisation of norms as processes (Krook and True 2012). This means that norms are continuously (re)shaped by support, resistance and opposition (Roggeband 2019). In addition, the article contributed to debates on forms of opposition to gender equality at the EU level by bringing new perspectives on the ideological cleavage created by debates on the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament. For this purpose, strategies of opposition to ratification were analysed via the framework of direct and indirect forms of opposition to gender equality developed in the gender and politics scholarship (Ahrens 2018a; Kantola and Lombardo 2021). The first question I asked in this article concerned the discursive constructions of support and opposition to the ratification by MEPs. The second question I asked concerned the effects these constructions have had on ratification and gender equality as a policy issue in the EP.

The article draws on theoretical frameworks developed in international relations and uses the concepts of norm promoters (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and norm antipreneurs (Bloomfield 2016), conceptualising gender equality actors in the EP as norm promoters and anti-gender actors as norm antipreneurs. This helped in identifying the actors and political groups working against the gender equality norm in the EP. Furthermore, the article drew on feminist international relations theories that regard norms as processes (Krook and True 2012). This means that the meaning of norms is continually shaped by support, resistance and opposition (Roggeband 2019). Furthermore, norm antipreneurs' strategies were analysed via the framework of direct and indirect forms of opposition to gender equality developed in the gender and politics scholarship (Ahrens 2018a; Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

Combining these two scholarships was necessary to cover all factors when analysing opposition to a supranational norm (ratification of the Istanbul Convention) that relates to gendered violence (opposition to gender equality).

For this article, the research material consists of a total of 122 interviews with parliamentary actors, which corresponds to the total of the EUGenDem interview dataset at the time of writing the analysis. For this article, the codes ‘opposition to gender equality’, ‘gender ideology’ and ‘Istanbul Convention’ were retrieved from the EUGenDem code list on Atlas.Ti and analysed separately. In addition, the material includes all EP plenary debates about the EU’s ratification (N = 7), which means analysing over 533 oral and written interventions on the part of MEPs using the 24 official EU languages.

This article showed that the debates over the EU’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament were essentially ideological, which left little space in which to assess the legal implication of such a ratification on EU law. Four discursive constructions emerged from the analysis. The first two supported ratification by encouraging the EU to act as a role model vis-à-vis its member states and pinpointing the few provisions of the Convention that would be covered via ratification. The last two opposed ratification by arguing that supranational ratification is redundant because national legal frameworks suffice and that the text is too controversial and dangerous.

5.2 UNITED IN CRISIS: ABORTION POLITICS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND POLITICAL GROUPS’ DISPUTE OVER EU VALUES

Article II is published in the academic peer-reviewed Journal for Common Market Studies. The article analyses the various constructions of a supranational right to abortion in the EU by political groups in the context of the parliamentary processes leading to the adoption of the 2021 Matic resolution on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the European Union.

The article relied on previous research from the gender and politics scholarship and the EU politics scholarship. First, gender scholars have long established the controversial nature of abortion debates in politics (Outshoorn and

Lovenduski 1986). Specifically, abortion debates are known to be used in an instrumental way by anti-gender actors to oppose the development of a supranational gender equality norm (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Second, recent developments in the EU politics scholarship inspired by deconstructive approaches (Lombardo 2016) showed that the meaning attributed to EU values is dynamic (Mos 2020). Article II brings new perspectives to these debates by analysing how different constructions of EU values were used instrumentally in abortion debates by political groups in pursuit of their respective agendas. Empirically, discourses on abortion in the EU generate a recurrent appeal to EU values on the part all political groups, albeit under different meanings. A key objective of this article was to analyse the different meanings attributed to EU values vis-à-vis abortion politics.

In this article, I first asked how a right to abortion in the EU was constructed by political groups and how EU values were used in an instrumental way to frame groups' support for or opposition to the right. Finally, I asked what the impact of these constructions was on supranational gender-equality policymaking in the European Parliament.

Theoretically, the article builds on a constructivist approach to EU values (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009) and regards them as disputed and ambiguous (Mos 2020). I contend that the ambiguity of EU values permits a flexible interpretation of support for equality norms (Eigenmann 2021). Abortion debates are an important site for analysing the meaning of EU values because the issue is prone to produce strong contestations and ideological views on the EU as a supranational policymaker on gender equality.

The research material was comprised of a first dataset of all FEMM-committee-level and plenary-level debates and all policy documents leading to the adoption of the Matić resolution (N = 3 debates, 7 documents). It also includes the political groups' press releases on the Matić resolution, when available, because these showcase the importance attributed to the issue by each group (N = 5). The second dataset includes all plenary- and committee-level debates since 2019, when groups debated abortion as an internal EU matter (N = 9).

The article found that, within the European Parliament – an actor still, in majority, prone to advancing equality norms – attempts to renegotiate a common EU identity around shared values, even symbolically, with the aim to facilitating unity during crises (i.e., the threat posed by nationalism and disintegration trends), helped

shape a progressive discourse on abortion in the EU. Attacks on abortion rights in member states were increasingly constructed as alien to EU values despite efforts by some political groups to reframe the content of such values. Therefore, despite strong opposition to gender equality, the adoption of the Matic resolution indicates that a progressive discourse on abortion still had validity in the EP.

Thus, the article concludes that respect for abortion rights was regarded as a marker of the EU bloc, even if only symbolically. It marked boundaries with ‘others’ in the EU — defined as far-right extremist governments — and seemed to facilitate unity among some political groups during a crisis defined by Eurosceptic and nationalist movements.

5.3 GENDER, VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: STRUGGLES OVER SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Article III was co-authored with Professor Johanna Kantola and published in the peer-reviewed academic journal *Social Politics* in 2020. In this article, we study the ways in which key actors in the European Parliament (MEPs, political groups, staff and the MeTooEP campaign) discursively constructed sexual harassment as a problem in and for the Parliament. Further, we analysed how these constructions have shaped the solutions put forward to prevent sexual harassment within the Parliament. By considering the possibilities for institutional changes, the study highlights the potential for and resistance to tackling sexual harassment in the Parliament. Here, we shifted our attention to the internal practices of gendered violence in the EP. Thus, Article III marks a difference from Articles I and II because it turns the spotlight toward the Parliament itself, not only toward its role as supranational policymaker.

This article contributes to scholarly debates on formal and informal institutions and the ways in which they are shaped by discourses (Erikson 2019). In the article, we first asked about the different discursive constructions of sexual harassment as a problem in the EP by different actors. Second, we asked how these constructions shaped the solutions that were put forward by parliamentary actors to solve the problem identified in the first research question. Finally, we asked what the effects of these discourses were for institutional changes in the Parliament.

We answered these questions via theories developed in the feminist institutionalism scholarship, in which formal and informal institutions are key to understanding the processes behind progressive gender reforms (Mackay 2014; Waylen 2014, 2017). We applied this framework with the understanding that institutions are fluid (Bacchi and Rönblom 2014) and that an analysis of discourses best explains the chances for institutional changes and institutional resistance (Erikson 2019). Our key contribution was to show that discourses influence institutional arrangements against sexual harassment in the European Parliament. They contribute to resisting deep institutional reforms (i.e., institutional displacement, see Waylen 2014) and lead to a patchy institutional response (i.e., some institutional layering, see Waylen 2014).

The research material consisted of 51 interviews with MEPs and staff conducted in the European Parliament between 2018 and 2019. This corresponds to the EUGenDem interview dataset at the time of writing the analysis. For this article, the codes ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘sexual harassment_MeTooEP’ were retrieved from the EUGenDem code list and analysed separately. Furthermore, we have analysed all publicly available official EP documents and plenary debates in relation to sexual harassment. Finally, we have included material collected in relation to MeTooEP, a staff-led campaign in the Parliament against sexual harassment.

In this article, we found that some discourses on institutional arrangements against sexual harassment in the EP disrupted what was seen as normal and entered into a struggle with an opposing discourse that sought to preserve the integrity of the EP via a ‘good institution’ discourse. The analysis showed the power of discourse in maintaining and ignoring practices of gendered violence in the EP, despite the EP’s key role as a supranational gender equality policymaker. Some pro-equality groups carved out space for institutional changes by defining sexual harassment as an abuse of gendered power that required new institutional rules. In contrast, other groups resisted institutional changes by framing sexual harassment as a cultural and individual problem that could only be solved by changing individual attitudes. Some MEPs of influential position in the EP constructed a ‘good institution’ discourse, in which the progressive image of the Parliament was celebrated, and left no space to discuss instances of gendered violence. In response to this, the MeTooEP campaign, an internal staff-led campaign against sexual harassment in the EP, sought to deconstruct this ‘good institution’ discourse to show that EP workers suffered from different forms of harassment.

We concluded that actors in the European Parliament were differently positioned in terms of resisting or supporting progressive institutional changes and differences emerged mostly among political groups. However, this was not exclusively true, because internal disagreements existed. As a result, EP institutions have been only partially transformed.

5.4 MOBILIZATION AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: THE METOOEP CAMPAIGN

Article IV was published in the academic peer-reviewed *European Journal of Women's Studies* in 2021. The article deals with the internal staff-led campaign against sexual harassment within the European Parliament that emerged in the aftermath of the global #metoo movement in 2017, the MeTooEP campaign. Following the analytical shift introduced in Article III, Article IV focuses on the internal practices of the EP. It sheds lights on the influential actors combating sexual harassment in the EP and analyses the extent to which the Parliament is a supportive and enabling environment for an internal mobilisation against sexual harassment.

The article contributes to debates on social movements and women's movements within the state's administration. It brings a new perspective to it as the European Parliament is a supranational body. Furthermore, it contributes to debates within Feminist Institutionalism on the role of formal and informal parliamentary rules in maintaining or challenging gendered inequalities by analysing how the campaign strategically used parliamentary resources to its advantages, as well as how parliamentary rules and bodies resisted the campaign.

For this purpose, I first asked, in this article, about the processes behind the emergence of the MeTooEP campaign in the European Parliament. Second, I asked about the ways in which the European Parliament's institutional bodies and rules either constrained or empowered the campaign.

In this article, I draw on theoretical concepts from feminist institutionalism (FI) (Chappell and Waylen, 2013), femocrats and feminism governance (Halley et al. 2006) to analyse both the nature of the campaign (agenda, actors and strategies) and whether the parliamentary mechanisms (formal and informal rules, regulations, practices and routines) tolerated/boosted or resisted/blocked the campaign. These

concepts helped me in analysing the campaign's actors, agenda and strategies (Banaszak 2010), and its ability to turn parliamentary rules and bodies into strategic advantages (Ahrens 2016). The analysis is also inspired by the concept of feminist critical friendship (Chappell and Mackay, 2021), which seek to uncover the strategic possibilities of institutional actors seeking changes. In other words, the concept encourages researchers to check the reality of these actors' institutional context and constraints when assessing their successes. The main idea is that institutional actors seeking changes are constrained by their institutional environment and it would be unproductive to place unrealistic expectations on them.

The research material consisted, first, of 63 interviews with parliamentary actors, including four in-depth interviews with key informants involved with the issue of sexual harassment within the Parliament. This corresponds to the EUGenDem interview dataset at the time of writing the analysis. On Atlas.Ti, the code list aimed to identify patterns regarding the campaign's internal strategies, such as network and institutional knowledge, and external strategies, such as communication outreach on Twitter. Second, the research material consisted of the MeTooEP Twitter account blog, as well as audio and writing recordings of events attended by the campaign.

The article found that the actors behind the MeTooEP campaign were key to its growth. Via mobilising their personal skills and networks, developing internal and external strategies, and crafting a clear message of anti-harassment protection for all, they shaped a leading campaign within the European Parliament. Because MeTooEP existed within the EP infrastructures, it benefited from an extensive variety of resources otherwise unavailable to outsiders. To this extent, the Parliament facilitated the development of MeTooEP. The immediate availability of political resources, such as decision-making rooms and the frequent presence of journalists, boosted the campaign's influence and visibility. Nonetheless, the rigid institutional settings of the Parliament, such as the imperative to preserve the institution's reputation, restricted the campaign and led to weak outcomes for internal institutional reforms.

Finally, the article also noted the lack of intersectional perspectives within the campaign because sexual harassment was defined as a major problem for the political and administrative staff of the Parliament, with solutions crafted for them,

but this ignores the situation of those working in non-political services, such as catering and maintenance services.

In the following section, I discuss these four articles together in terms of overarching findings.

6 REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION ON RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this last section, I present the dissertation's findings and highlight their empirical and theoretical contributions. The section is organised around the two main research questions. First, the dissertation asks how issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are constructed in the EP by the PGs, both as supranational policy fields and vis-à-vis the EP's own internal practices (i.e., policy and politics). Second, it asks about the impact of these constructions on the EP as a progressive supranational policymaker for gender equality (i.e., polity). First, I present the empirical contribution by reviewing the political groups' discursive constructions on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Second, I discuss the theoretical contribution by highlighting a mismatch between the EP's discursive practices and its institutional practices regarding issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Finally, I discuss the impact on the EP as a progressive supranational policymaker for gender equality.

6.1 THE POLITICAL GROUPS' DISCURSIVE PRACTICES ON ISSUES OF GENDERED VIOLENCE AND BODILY RIGHTS

Via analysing the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP, a major research objective of this dissertation is to analyse the discursive practices of the political groups (PGs). This includes analysing the PGs' discursive practices around the issues, both when they are debated as a supranational policy field and as part of the EP's internal practices. For instance, sexual harassment is an issue that can be discussed by the political groups as a supranational policy field and as an internal problem in the EP.

Previous research suggests that it is important to pay attention to the differences and similarities between and among the PGs when analysing the groups' dynamics and discursive practices (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022; Kantola 2022; see also Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). As discussed in Section 2.3, the

previous literature has categorised the PGs via several dimensions according to their similarities and differences. For instance, PGs can be categorised along a socio-economic left/rights axis (Hix, Noury and Roland 2005), an integration/demarcation axis (*ibid.*), a pro-/anti-EU integration axis (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002), a cultural/moral divide (Mondo and Close 2019), and a GAL/TANs axis (green/alternative/libertarian versus traditional/authoritarian/nationalist) (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002). The GAL category includes PGs favourable to ecology, alternative politics and libertarianism, while the TAN category includes PGs favourable to ‘traditional values, opposition to immigration, and defence of the national community’ (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002, 976). Nonetheless, boundaries between these categories are not clear cut. The existence of tensions and contradictions within groups, for instance, on human right issues (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021), show that PG are not homogeneous. As a result, it can be misleading to situate one PG within one of these categories, and therefore, the dissertation’s articles have not used these categories to make sense of the differences and similarities between and within PGs.

Instead, the articles have used terms such as ‘pro-/ anti- gender equality’ PGs or MEPs to draw attention to the forms of support and opposition to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. However, these poles are not homogeneous either, and they must be viewed in a nuanced way. Some MEPs are also favourable to some forms of gender equality within anti- gender equality PGs, and some groups, such as the EPP, are neither pro- nor anti-gender equality. Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo identified multiple direct and indirect strategies of opposition to gender equality in the EP (2021) (see also Section 3.3), which are helpful in situating PGs on the pro-/anti-gender-equality axis in a nuanced manner. Their framework highlights not only the multiple forms of contestation regarding gender equality in the EP but also the differences and similarities between and within the PGs. On one hand, the discursive practice of outright rejection, a strategy that openly delegitimises the supranational norm of gender equality, clearly indicates anti-gender equality tendencies on the part of a group. On the other hand, uncovering indirect forms of opposition to gender equality, such as placing the emphasis on the subsidiarity principle rather than pushing for more gender equality, sheds light on the tensions within PGs that might otherwise be regarded as pro-gender-equality groups. The impact of the subsidiarity argument on gender equality policymaking is further developed below (see Section 6.3). Therefore, the dissertation does not seek to categorise PGs distinctly but, rather, to position them as leaning toward either

pro- or anti-gender-equality while highlighting the nuances and contradictions between the two poles and within the PGs. A contribution of this dissertation in relation to previous research on opposition to gender equality is to analyse how such opposition can be instrumentalised for a strategic purpose, such as limiting the power and competences of the EU. Direct opposition to gender equality can also be instrumentalised as a far-right Eurosceptic opposition that justifies a strict application of the subsidiarity principle, to make the EU (i.e., polity) appear as less threatening. Finally, opposition to gender equality can be used for the strategic purpose of demarcating far-right Eurosceptic ‘backward’ member states vs. progressive pro-EU member states to justify the need for a stronger unity of the latter against the form, to protect so-called EU-values.

The empirical findings demonstrate that the socialist S&D, the liberal ALDE/Renew, the Greens-EFA and the left GUE/NGL groups tend to construct the EU’s ratification to the Istanbul Convention, guaranteeing a right to abortion and protection against sexual harassment in the EU, in progressive terms. These groups belong to the more progressive branch of the EP (i.e., the GAL axis) and tend to be pro-gender-equality. For instance, they support ratification of the Istanbul Convention as an important step in the eradication of gendered violence and as a milestone in the pursuit of gender equality objectives in the EU. Similarly, they constructed the problem of sexual harassment within the EP as an impairment of the democratic functioning of parliamentary work and regarded it as an abuse of gendered power. Simultaneously, they supported the MeTooEP campaign and provided it with access to resources. Finally, they defended a right to abortion in the EU via self-determination arguments and as a precondition for gender equality. More specifically, they constructed restrictions on abortion rights in member states as a threat to the EU’s democratic principles and values. However, their support was nuanced by the fact that only some member states were regarded as backward and in need of catching up, overlooking most indirect barriers to abortion rights in several other member states. Tensions within these groups are further developed below. Indeed, one contribution of this dissertation in relation to previous research is to show that despite their support for a unified, strong and gender-equal EU, these groups use the norm of gender equality to stress differences within the EU, which amplify mostly an East-West divide around this norm, while overlooking the existing opposition within their own political groups or member states, in order to create a sense of emergency for unity behind what they see as the gender equality EU norm.

In contrast, the radical right populists (RRPs) and Eurosceptic ECR, ENF, EFDD and ID groups tend to construct the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention and thus a right to abortion in the EU and protection against sexual harassment in conservative and traditional terms. They are located on the TAN axis, but some are more radical than others. For instance, the ECR is more moderate, and the ID is more radical (Kantola 2022; Gaweda, Miller & Siddi 2022). They tend to be anti-gender-equality groups. Nevertheless, support for some form of gender equality can be seen in their discursive practice. For instance, they will reaffirm their support for ending violence against women when debating the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention but consistently oppose the development of gender equality policies at the supranational level. This is justified by their Euroscepticism and support for the subsidiary principle and member states' sovereignty. While such a strategy strengthens the norm of ending violence against women, it weakens supranational gender equality objectives and limits what can be achieved within the polity. Empirically, during debates on the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention, these groups' discursive practices highlighted different degrees of opposition, both within and among themselves. Some MEPs argued that the ratification to the Istanbul Convention at the national level would suffice; therefore, they opposed its ratification at the EU level. Other MEPs opposed the EU's ratification fiercely, not only via opposing its ratification at the supranational level but also via opposing the content of the Convention. While confirming their support for ending violence against women, MEPs in these groups argued that the Convention carried a gender ideology. This ideology, according to them, constituted a threat to traditional values. Likewise, the ECR, ENF, EFDD and ID groups condemned the fact that issues of abortion rights were discussed in the EP by arguing in favour of member states' strict sovereignty. They considered debates over restrictions on abortion rights in the EU to be an unacceptable interference with sovereignty principles, limiting again what can be achieved in the polity.

Generally, these groups opposed the development of supranational policies on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights by contesting the EP's competence. Opposition to gender equality is here strategically used to oppose the EU as a powerful polity. They also opposed the development of internal practices to help end sexual harassment within the EP. They opposed the introduction of structural changes because they believed sexual harassment was foremost an individual and cultural problem. Likewise, they did not participate or engage with the MeTooEP campaign. The campaign was composed of staff members who belonged to PGs on

the GAL dimension and, to some extent, resembled a trade union, which was more attractive to MEPs and staff on the left side of the political spectrum than to those on the right side of the political spectrum.

These findings are not particularly surprising because we can expect groups on the GAL dimension to be pro-EU integration (i.e., polity) and to support issues of gendered violence and bodily rights via progressive discursive practices. While we can expect groups on the TAN dimension to try to limit or contest EU integration and to oppose issues of gendered violence and bodily rights via direct and indirect strategies. However, as mentioned above, it is important to look at the internal tensions within groups and within these dimensions (GAL/TAN; pro-/anti-gender-equality). The previous literature has shown that PGs are split on issues related to gender equality along the lines of the National Party Delegations (NPDs). The MEPs from one member state form one NPD within one group. For instance, the French MEPs in the S&D group form the S&D French delegation. Emilie Mondo and Caroline Close found that the place of religion in MEPs' member state of origin was one determining factor for MEPs' voting behaviour on abortion right (2019). Likewise, it was found that S&D, a group regarded as pro-gender-equality, pro-integration and on the GAL dimension, included a sometimes-reluctant Italian delegation, with MEPs abstaining or voting against the group line over LGBTIQ+ rights (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021).

Against this background, the dissertation confirms the above-mentioned findings and shows that NPDs add an important layer in studying PGs' discursive practices on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Thus, the dissertation demonstrates that the EP is not an homogeneous actor, but rather composed of heterogeneous political groups. It contributes to previous research on EU studies by emphasising these differences via case studies (gendered violence and bodily rights) that are prone to spark such contestation. As a policy field, gendered violence and bodily rights were not homogeneously supported by, for instance, the S&D group, because some MEPs opposed the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on the grounds that the convention was too controversial domestically. This means that, while PGs are key players in the EP, gendered issues are prone to produce internal conflicts among NPDs within a group. A contribution to previous research on gender and EU studies is to emphasise the NPDs as important power players in relation to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in the European Parliament.

In turn, the dissertation showed that tensions within a PG also existed in relation to how the EP should regulate its own internal practices so as to prevent sexual harassment. However, the data and empirical analysis regarding the EP's own internal practices did not allow us to conclude whether these tensions were created by NPDs. Nonetheless, it showed that groups such as the Greens/EFA and S&D did not homogeneously support the MeTooEP staff-led campaign against sexual harassment in the EP. Some MEPs were critical of the campaign and thought that the issue would best be solved internally, without turning the public spotlight on the EP.

Finally, I turn to discussing the largest group in the EP, the EPP group. I chose to discuss it separately because of its greater heterogeneity in comparison to other groups. Previous research has shown that the EPP displays a rather neutral positioning vis-à-vis gender equality, sexuality and human right issues and is characterized by internal ambiguities. For instance, internal ambiguities were strong in relation to issues of abortion rights and emerged mostly between NPDs. Emilie Mondo and Caroline Close showed that Slovakia, Italy, Poland, Malta, Croatia, Hungary and Cyprus were the most conservative NPDs in the EPP vis-à-vis abortion rights, while Sweden, Belgium and France were the most progressive (2019). The place of religion in these NPDs played a significant role here. This was also confirmed in relation to LGBTIQ+ rights (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021).

As a result, the EPP group is fundamentally characterised by internal tensions and ambiguities due to its NPDs; therefore, as a group, the EPP maintains a rather neutral position vis-à-vis those issues. Scholars have referred to this group as one 'sit[ting] on the fence' rather than one taking a strong stance on gender equality and human right issues (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). This dissertation confirms such a finding. For instance, with regard to the problem of sexual harassment within the EP, the EPP group defended the status quo. This meant constructing anyone who seek to challenge the institution as a troublemaker, be they RRP and Eurosceptic groups or the MeTooEP campaign. Nonetheless, a contribution of this dissertation is to analyse this (lack of) position as a reaction to the fact that opposition to gender equality is mostly interpreted as a far-right Eurosceptic opposition. Since the EPP is the biggest and most established group in the EP, it cannot be assimilated with a behaviour attached to Euroscepticism. Thus, opposition to gender equality is brushed away as a far-right Eurosceptic exception. Nonetheless, it remains that the EPP is not, as a group, a promoter of the gender

equality norm at supranational level. And, because opposition to gender equality is not an available tool, the EPP's main argument is that of defending a strict application of the subsidiarity principle. An argument further developed below.

In a similar vein, the dissertation finds that the EPP has also marked its differences with far-right Eurosceptic groups over abortion rights issue. While the EPP had partnered up with the ECR group in 2013 to oppose the Estrela report on sexual and reproductive health and rights, in 2021 the two group did not cooperate. Nevertheless, the EPP did strongly oppose the development of a right to abortion at the supranational level via subsidiarity argument. Such an argument is not perceived as Eurosceptic, or anti-gender equality, firstly because it is enshrined in the Treaties, and secondly because it is interpreted as protecting the EU against further attack about its legitimacy (see Section 6.3). Furthermore, the dissertation confirms internal ambiguities within the group. On one hand, the group actively contributed to the drafting process of the Matić resolution, in which the right to safe and legal access to abortion in the EU was included, with MEP Frances Fitzgerald, from the EPP, acting as shadow rapporteur. On the other hand, the group ultimately put to vote a separate report that was devoid of content competing with the Matić resolution, and MEP Frances Fitzgerald voted in favour of the Matić resolution. In the end, the Matić resolution was adopted instead of the EPP's separate report. As the biggest group in the EP, we could expect the EPP to wield sufficient political power to have its report adopted (Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet 2022). However, the EPP's separate report did not receive the group's full political support and resources. In this sense, it can be argued that, because of a lack of political action, the EPP did not strongly oppose the development, albeit in a non-legislative fashion, of a right to abortion in the EU.

The impact of these empirical findings is further developed in Section 6.3 below. In the next section, I discuss the mismatch between the EP's discursive practices on gendered violence and bodily rights as policy fields and the EP's internal practices on these issues.

6.2 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S DISCURSIVE PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES MISMATCH

While the previous section presented and discussed the dissertation's empirical contribution, this section discusses its theoretical contribution. By analysing the PGs' discursive practices around issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, both as a supranational policy field (i.e., a right to abortion in the EU) and in relation to the EP's own practices (i.e., sexual harassment within the EP), the dissertation found an important mismatch. This mismatch corresponds to the discrepancy between the self-projected image of the EP as a progressive supranational policymaker on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights and its response to internal incidents of sexual harassment. Therefore, a key contribution of this dissertation is contrasting the EP's role as a supranational policymaker and its role in regulating its own internal gendered practices. Such a contribution was made possible by the theoretical framework of the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights because it included a policy dimension and an institutional one. Furthermore, a contribution of this dissertation in relation to previous research on gender and politics is to stress the importance of contrasting external versus internal attitudes towards the gender equality norm in a political institution, to fully grasp the conditions under which gender equality is pursued (or not) and to question the legitimacy of such democratic institution.

Regarding theory, the framework contributed to demonstrating that the PGs' discursive practices on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights constitute gendered practices (Bacchi 2009, 2017; Shepherd 2008). Namely, they reproduce gendered inequality. For instance, by constructing sexual harassment as an individual and cultural problem, PGs reproduce gendered inequalities by maintaining the issue at the individual level rather than seeking transformative structural changes. Simultaneously, the framework showed that PGs' discursive practices can stretch, bend or fix the meanings of gendered violence and bodily rights (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). For instance, to fix or crystalise the meaning of gendered violence exclusively in terms of violence against women reproduces distrust toward the Istanbul Convention, in which violence is discussed in gendered terms. Thus, a contribution of this dissertation to the literature on violence against women in politics is to analyse what, in this case, gendered violence does to the political institution, rather than to individuals.

Likewise, bending debates on gendered violence and bodily rights toward subsidiarity arguments moves these issues away from gender-equality objectives. For instance, when the EU's ratification to the Istanbul Convention is discussed within the frame of the subsidiarity principle, this unnecessarily reduces the space in which to debate gender equality in the EU when EU law *de facto* guarantees the ratification of a treaty within the scope of the EU's competence. In turn, the adoption of the Matic resolution showed that consensus around a right that is traditionally not regarded as falling within EU competence (i.e., safe and legal access to abortion) is possible when restrictions to such a right are constructed as a threat to the EU's democratic bloc. In such cases, the meaning of bodily right is bent away from the subsidiarity principle and toward the gender equality objective. Thus, the protection of the EU's democratic bloc against undemocratic processes is aligned with the gender equality objective of providing the right to safe and legal access to abortion (for more on norm alignment, see Krook and True 2012). Thus, choice of discourse is a political decision that has an impact on whether gendered violence and bodily right issues are positively or negatively received.

Furthermore, the framework included an analysis of the strategies of opposition to gender equality in the EP in relation to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. As discussed in the previous section, these strategies included both direct and indirect forms of opposition. One contribution made by including oppositional strategies into the discursive politics framework is to show that the EP is not a homogeneous policymaker regarding gendered violence and bodily rights issues. There are internal contradictions within the EP based on its PGs' different approaches to these issues, as well as within the PGs based on their NPDs' different approaches.

In turn, the discursive politics framework included an institutional dimension, which also included discursive practices, in which the EP's internal practices in relation to sexual harassment were assessed. This included analysing the formal EP bodies and rules (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010) that are relevant to preventing sexual harassment. These included, for instance, the EP Anti-harassment Committee, which deals with complaints against MEPs by members of the staff; the PGs' statutes and the EP's rules of procedure. It also included an analysis of the codes of conduct and mandatory trainings against sexual harassment that were put in place, in a patchy way, in some PGs, under the pressure of the MeTooEP campaign. Finally, it included analysing informal EP bodies and rules (Mackay,

Kenny and Chappell 2010), such as an informal ‘hire and fire’ practice, in which MEPs can rapidly terminate their staff employment contracts, and silencing practices, in which the EP administration intervened to stop the MeTooEP campaign from participating in public events. A contribution of this dissertation to previous research on Feminist Institutionalism, is to show that an institutional arena like the EP can also be regarded as a supportive platform to movements seeking internal gender-equal reforms, an argument further developed below.

By analysing the discursive politics of sexual harassment as an internal problem in the EP, the findings showed that institutional reforms were difficult to achieve. Some pro-equality MEPs tended to push for new rules (i.e., institutional layering; see Waylen 2014), most MEPs argued for an attitude change (i.e., at the individual rather than institutional level), some EPP MEPs defended the status quo to preserve the institution and, finally, the MeTooEP campaign sought to deeply transform institutions (i.e., institutional displacement; see Waylen 2014). Therefore, analysing the institutional layer in relation to gendered violence and bodily rights through the case of sexual harassment showed that people working in the EP were not free from violence and that the EP failed to provide an adequate gender-equal institutional response. This occurred despite the self-projected image of the EP as a champion for gender equality (Locher 2012), thus indicating a mismatch.

As a result, a key contribution of this framework was to contrast, first, the discursive politics at play when the EP acts as a supranational policymaker for gendered violence and bodily rights (via the sub-issues of the EU’s ratification to the Istanbul Convention and a right to abortion in the EU) and, second, the discursive politics at play when it seeks to regulate its own internal gendered practices (via the sub-issues of sexual harassment within the EP and the MeTooEP campaign). On one hand, the framework contributed to analysing the discursive practices of PGs when they attribute meanings to the issues as supranational policy fields. On the other hand, it contributed to analysing both their discursive practices when these issues are discussed as part of the EP’s internal practices and the EP’s institutional response to gendered violence. In doing so, the framework contrasts two characteristics of the EP, namely being a site of gender equality policy formation and a site of gendered violence.

In the last instance, the EP is not regarded as a supranational policymaker but, rather, as both an institution in charge of regulating its own practices and as a

site where gendered violence occurs. Further, the analysis of the MeTooEP campaign contributes another important factor, namely that the EP is also a site of resistance. Therefore, despite the lack of efficient EP institutional response to sexual harassment, the EP can be a place where actors mobilise to seek internal changes through lobbying. Indeed, the EP indirectly provided access to facilities and equipment that helped promote the campaign. This included communication outreach, such as providing access to journalists in the EP, and access to decision-making premises, such as plenaries and group meetings.

In sum, the application of a discursive politics framework to the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP demonstrated that these issues are not homogeneously supported by the PGs as supranational policy fields. Forms of direct and indirect opposition are widespread and visible across groups. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that the general tendency is toward a progressive discourse on these issues, as illustrated by the adoption of the Matić resolution. Before the Matić resolution, reports on bodily rights did not mention abortion rights in the EU, or if they did, such reports were not adopted (i.e., the Estrela report in 2013). The framework also demonstrated that there is no consensus in the EP regarding the appropriate institutional response to prevent internal incidents of sexual harassment. The self-projected image of the EP as a good institution in terms of gender equality policy (as discussed in the next section) means that institutional reforms are difficult to achieve. My co-author, Johanna Kantola, and I found that the ‘good institution’ discourse is specific to the EP. It corresponds to protecting the status quo by presenting the EP as an institution in which gender equality is important and mechanisms are already in place to prevent sexual harassment. It denies the existence of a problem by stressing existing mechanisms, even though these mechanisms are inefficient. The MeTooEP campaign first had to deconstruct this ‘good institution’ discourse by bringing forward anonymous testimonies of sexual harassment in the EP before it was able to provide an alternative discourse in which the EP must take responsibility and implement institutional reforms.

The mismatch between the EP’s discursive practices and institutional practices in relation to the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights nuanced the self-projected image of the EP as a progressive gender-equal actor. As further developed below, this suggests that the legitimacy of a supranational policymaker for gender equality policies is undermined when its own institutional practices lead to, reproduce and maintain gendered violence.

6.3 IMPACT ON THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AS A SUPRANATIONAL POLICYMAKER FOR GENDER EQUALITY

A final key objective of this dissertation and an important contribution of the discursive politics framework is to analyse the impact of the discursive practices and institutional practices on the EP as a progressive supranational policymaker for gender equality in the EU. Furthermore, because the EP is conceptualised here as a constitutive actor of so-called EU value (i.e., democracy and gender equality), this dissertation analyses the impact that these discursive and institutional practices have on the EU as a polity.

As seen above, PGs have different discursive practices in relation to the issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. They present differences and similarities between them and tensions within them. This means that the EP is not a homogeneous actor but is, rather, characterised by internal tensions and ambiguities regarding issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Analysing the PG's discursive practices and the EP's institutional practices on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights highlights a mismatch between the two (see Section 6.2) and offers new insights into the EP as a supranational policymaker for gender equality within the EU. As described in Section 2.3 of this dissertation, the EP is the most democratic of all EU institutions and is typically described in the academic literature as the strongest supporter of gender equality within the polity (van der Vleuten 2019; Ahrens 2018b). The EP itself has used this reputation in an instrumental way to strengthen its legitimacy (Van der Vleuten 2019; Macrae 2010) and mark its identity/role vis-à-vis other EU institutions (Kantola 2010). Much like the EU projects a self-image of 'a beacon of fundamental rights protection' (Smismans 2010, 50), the EP projects a self-image of a gender-equality-friendly body. As discussed in Section 2.3, the EP played an important role in extending the scope of the EU's gender equality policy apparatus to new grounds beyond the traditional limit of the employment sphere (Jacquot 2015; Montoya 2013; Kantola 2010). This development had the result of expanding the EP's normative powers within the polity.

The dissertation confirms throughout the articles that issues of gendered violence and bodily rights are constructed in progressive terms on the grounds that the EP is a modern, pro-active, and progressive venue of decision-making for

equality rights. The adoption of the Matić resolution, which contains non-binding provisions on a right to safe and legal access to abortion, shows that the defence of such a right is used as a discursive practice to mark boundaries within the EU between the progressive self and backward others. Here, backward others are constructed as Eurosceptic nationalist groups (i.e., TANs) that seek to sabotage progressive developments in the EP and the EU. Although such discursive practice led to the adoption of a common EP position on abortion rights in the EU, it nevertheless overlooked most indirect barriers to abortion in the EU and focused exclusively on certain member states. This has an impact on gender equality as a supranational policy field because it narrows the existence of gendered inequalities to only some ‘bad apples’ in the EU and reproduces the idea that the EU as a polity and the EP as one of its bodies are both, in principle, championing equality issues (see also Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). The ‘bad apples’ are exceptions.

Another important finding, as mentioned above, that has an impact on the EP as a supranational policymaker for gender equality is the widespread use of the subsidiarity principal argument. The subsidiarity principle consists in arguing that a given measure is best taken at the level closest to the citizens, that is, at the member state level rather than at the EU level. This principle is important because it allowed the existence of the EU as a supranational polity, in the first place, by limiting supra-state powers and providing wide consensus, even for those reluctant to transfer state powers to supranational bodies. Research has shown that the ‘subsidiarity card’ is strategically used by RRP groups to disengage with issues such as gender equality, human rights, democracy (Ahrens and Van der Vleuten 2019; Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustin 2021) and abortion (Kantola and Rolandsen Agustin 2016). The use of the subsidiarity argument is recent in the history of the EP. Indeed, previously, the EP had rather consistently attempted to expand its powers and policy scope, rather than limit them (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustin 2021). In the gender and politics literature, the strategic use of the subsidiarity principle is theorized as an indirect form of opposition to gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

This dissertation shows that the subsidiarity principle is widely used in relation to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. Empirically, the articles on the EU’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention and a right to abortion in the EU showed that PGs opposing ratification or abortion used this argument extensively. Therefore, the norm of gender equality often collided with the subsidiarity principle (see Krook and True 2012 for norm competition). The subsidiarity principle is

therefore strategically used by anti-gender equality and RRP groups (i.e., TAN) (Kantola and Lombardo 2021), but it is also used by the largest EPP group. As mentioned above, the EPP group is often referred to as ‘sitting on the fence’ in relation to gender equality and human rights issues (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). However, the EPP group is not characterised by Euroscepticism, with its MEPs being rather pro-EU. Yet, the EPP as a group tends to use the subsidiarity principle in strategic ways to downplay the importance given to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights within the polity. As a result, it limits EP’s power and role within the polity. However, unlike RRP groups, the EPP does not suggest that the EP is an illegitimate policymaker. However, the use of the subsidiarity argument has important consequences for gender equality as a supranational policy field and the EP as a supranational policymaker.

Indeed, the strategic use of the subsidiarity principle to disengage from issues of gendered violence and bodily rights significantly limits what can be achieved and said about gender equality in the EP. Because of its legal nature, it constitutes an important argument. One that can convince pro-gender-equality groups of the necessity to limit what can be done and said about gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP. It seems more powerful than other forms of opposition to gender equality, such as outright rejection or the use of the gender ideology rhetoric (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). Indeed, such strong opposition has thus far been assimilated with far-right, radical and Eurosceptic actors and, thus, side-lined via the cordon sanitaire (see, for instance, Brack 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019). Therefore, direct forms of opposition to gender equality have little impact on policy outcomes thus far (Elomäki and Kantola, 2021). With the subsidiarity argument, however, pro-gender-equality groups are encouraged to water down their demands, which limits progress in EU gender equality policymaking. So far, the subsidiarity argument was mainly used over issues for which EU competences were disputed. However, at term, there is a risk that it may be increasingly used to challenge acquired EU rights.

As the biggest group in the EP, the EPP’s discursive practices influence policy outcomes on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. It forces other groups to acknowledge the limits imposed by the subsidiarity principle and justify their actions despite it. Other groups cannot simply brush aside the argument of subsidiarity, because the principle has allowed the establishment of supranational decision-making in the first place by delimiting competences between the EU and

its member states. Furthermore, it acts in the interests of anti-gender-equality and Eurosceptic groups by preventing the further integration of gender equality policies and by weakening possibilities for pro-gender-equality groups to initiate progressive and meaningful policies. It is concerning for democracy that the largest group in the EP does not engage sufficiently in supporting the development of EU policies on gendered violence and bodily rights.

Even if the subsidiarity principle is enshrined in the Treaties, like each law and value, its content is dynamic, and interpretation can differ. This is what suggest the fact that previously the tendencies in the EP were to expand powers rather than to limit them via subsidiarity arguments (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustin 2021). Therefore, if interpreting the subsidiarity principle is a dynamic process, then the decision to fix its meaning in a particular way (and to emphasise its use within the scope of gendered violence and bodily right policies) is a political one. For instance, the subsidiarity principle could be interpreted in a way that gives priority to member states for actions best achieved at local level but that would ultimately be achieved at the supranational level in case of failure or inertia. A contribution of this dissertation is to argue that an opposition to gender equality from established political groups (i.e., the EPP), via a certain interpretation of EU law (i.e., subsidiarity principle), may be more successful in blocking the development of gender equality policies at the supranational level than an opposition coming from political groups regarded as radical, far-right and Eurosceptics.

Another important finding, as described above, is the mismatch between the dominant discursive practices in the EP regarding those issues and the internal institutional practices that maintain unchallenged incidents of gendered violence. However, we know from previous research that the EP projects a self-image of championing gender equality and human rights issues (Locher 2012; Van der Vleuten 2019; see also Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2021). This means that the EP does not put into practice what it projects as good policies for its member states. As a result, a dominant discursive practice is to describe the EP as a 'good institution'. The impact of this on the EP is that it denies the existence of a structural problem and reproduces self-complacency. It therefore becomes difficult to argue against the good institution discourse and for institutional change. Furthermore, the difficulties in seeking institutional reforms in the EP to prevent incidents of sexual harassment from happening have showed that many in the EP prefer to protect the EP's image rather than to protect people against sexual harassment efficiently. A key

contribution of this dissertation is to show that the internal institutional practices sustaining forms of gendered violence have an impact on the EP as a legitimate and democratic supranational policymaker for gender equality, and on the EU as a polity. Indeed, the dissertation argues that democratic or undemocratic practices in the EP have an impact on the nature of the polity. For instance, sexual harassment constitutes an impairment of the democratic functioning of parliamentary work and the inability to prevent gendered violence determine what is acceptable and tolerated within the polity.

Nevertheless, the article on the MeTooEP campaign showed that the EP can also act as a supportive platform for resistance and gender-equal claims. This can be seen as resulting from the EP's self-projected image as a supporter of gender equality. Indeed, being the host of an internally led mobilisation against sexual harassment matches the EP's image of a progressive institution, even if the mobilization emerged out of the silences and inactions of EP representatives. One contribution of this dissertation via analysing the MeTooEP campaign is to show that not only powerful actors in the EP can shape dominant discourse on gendered violence and bodily rights (i.e., political groups). Actors who usually stand in the shadow of politics, like staff members, can do so as well (i.e., MeTooEP).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the EP is simultaneously a site of policy formation on gendered issues and bodily rights, a site of gendered violence, a site of resistance, and finally a site where the polity is continuously being shaped. Against this background, the dissertation argues that the pursuit of gender equality is undermined when the institution in charge of delivering policies on issues of gendered violence and bodily rights itself reproduces gendered inequalities.

7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this dissertation has discussed the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the EP, both as supranational policy fields and as internal institutional practices. Simultaneously, the dissertation has shown the extent to which the discursive politics on these issues have shaped the EP as a progressive supranational policymaker for gender equality and the EU as a polity. Throughout, the dissertation has argued that the pursuit of gender equality objectives through policymaking at the supranational level is undermined when the institution in charge of delivering such policies itself maintains unchallenged instances of sexual harassment.

Analysing the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights as a supranational policy field in the EP demonstrated that the EP is not homogeneously supporting these issues but is, rather, characterised by internal tensions and contradictions among and within its political groups. Analysing the strategies of direct and indirect opposition to gender equality stressed the existence of both anti-gender-equality political groups in the EP and anti-gender-equality MEPs in political groups that are otherwise regarded as pro-gender-equality. The dissertation stressed that tensions within political groups with regard to issues of gendered violence and bodily rights were typically based on differences between NPDs.

Some pro-equality groups on the GAL dimension, that is, the progressive branch of the Parliament (i.e., S&D, ALDE/Renew, Greens-EFA and GUE/NGL) articulated a structural and intersectional understanding of gender when debating issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, both as supranational policy fields and as internal practices. In contrast, anti-gender groups belonging to the TAN dimension (i.e., ID, ENF, EFDD, ECR) typically articulated their contestation of gender equality, both as a legitimate norm and as a supranational policy field. These groups were outspoken, and their arguments mostly concentrate on constructing EU gender equality policies as a form of gender ideology. This dissertation stresses, however, that their opposition was mostly discursive and their strategies had little

effect on policy outcomes, so far. Nevertheless, their opposition reflects broader tendencies across Europe against gender equality.

Finally, the EPP has had an ambiguous position in constructing issues of gendered violence and bodily rights, despite being the largest and most powerful group in the EP. Large divisions exist within the group and are amplified within the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights because these constitute controversial issues. Such division is often determined by the NPD and the salience of the issue in the MEPs' member state. The group's line is to defend a strict interpretation of the subsidiarity principle, which was regarded as an indirect form of opposition to gender equality. Therefore, as the largest group in the EP, the EPP group's line has strongly shaped issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. It constitutes a strong argument and plays in favour of anti-gender, Eurosceptic groups by preventing the further integration of gender equality policies. Simultaneously, it weakens the possibilities for pro-equality groups in the Parliament. The findings indicate that the EPP, in particular, and subtle forms of opposition to gender equality more generally, deserve more scholarly attention to decipher invisible strategies and their powerful impact in blocking gender equality policy development.

Overall, the EP remains an institution in favour of gender equality policymaking, including regarding issues of gendered violence and bodily rights. However, the increasing use of direct and indirect strategies of opposition to gender equality could further impact the field. In particular, the increasing use of the subsidiarity principle could weaken the development of rights regarded as *acquis*. In turn, the direct forms of opposition to gender equality, such as the gender ideology rhetoric or the outright rejection of the norm, could slowly have an impact on policy outcomes in the EP. This dissertation has focused on the European Parliament and its political groups, but future research could further investigate the discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in other EU institutions, such as the European Commission or the European Council, which remains an opaque institution.

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PUBLICATIONS

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Norm under fire: support for and opposition to the European Union's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament

Valentine Berthet

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Valentine Berthet (she/her/hers)

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Norm under fire: support for and opposition to the European Union's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament

Valentine Berthet (she/her/hers) 



PhD researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT

The Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is contested across Europe by a strong anti-gender rhetoric, posing a direct threat to gender equality progress. Together with opposition to gender equality, attacks on the Convention have the effect of delegitimizing the norm that it embodies – namely, ending gender violence. Opposition is also visible in the European Parliament and shapes the discourse concerning possible ratification by the European Union (EU). Initially perceived by supporters in the European Parliament as a milestone for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality, the Convention soon became a norm “under fire” as the target of vehement anti-gender contestations. Using a unique set of interview data with key parliamentary actors and Members of the European Parliament, this article analyzes the discursive politics of contestation between norm promoters and norm “antipreneurs” regarding the EU's ratification of the Convention. The analysis shows how ratification is constructed in oppositional terms, with the findings illuminating direct and indirect forms of opposition to gender equality.

RÉSUMÉ

La Convention d'Istanbul sur la prévention et la lutte contre la violence à l'égard des femmes et la violence domestique est contestée en Europe par une forte rhétorique antiféministe, représentant une menace directe sur les acquis de l'égalité des genres. Cette opposition délégitime les normes internationales que la Convention promeut afin d'éradiquer les violences basées sur le genre. Cette opposition est visible au Parlement européen, notamment dans les différentes conceptions, exprimées par les parlementaires, de l'égalité des genres et d'une éventuelle ratification de la Convention par l'Union Européenne. D'abord perçue comme une étape importante pour l'égalité des genres, la Convention est rapidement devenue la cible des contestations antiféministes. Utilisant une base de données unique composée d'entretiens individuels avec des députés du Parlement européen et autres acteurs parlementaires, cet article analyse les mécanismes de contestation entre les

CONTACT Valentine Berthet  valentine.berthet@tuni.fi  PhD researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

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partisans et les opposants à la ratification de la Convention par l'Union Européenne. À travers l'analyse des différentes conceptions, exprimées au sein du Parlement, sur l'égalité des genres et sur les conséquences d'une éventuelle ratification pour l'Union Européenne, l'article montre l'entremêlement d'une opposition indirecte, imperceptibles mais qui joue beaucoup sur les chances de ratification, et une opposition déclarée qui attaque directement l'égalité des genres.

KEYWORDS Istanbul Convention; European Parliament; opposition to gender equality; norm contestation; norm antipreneurs

MOTS CLÉS Convention d'Istanbul; Parlement Européen; opposition à l'égalité des genres; opposition aux normes internationales; normes "antipreneurs"

Introduction

The Istanbul Convention ("the Convention") on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is the most comprehensive international and legally binding text of its kind. Negotiated in the Council of Europe, which counts 47 states as members, it entered into force in 34 of those states. The Convention defines violence against women as gender-based violence enshrined in structural gendered inequalities between women and men, making it the first legally binding international instrument to consider feminist claims about violence (Niemi, Peroni, and Stoyanova 2020). Specifically, Article 3(c) defines gender as "the socially constructed roles, behavior, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men."

Simultaneously, gender equality has become an increasingly contested concept, and anti-gender activists have attacked the Convention by defining it as a "gender ideology" and a threat to the traditional division of roles between women and men in society (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018). Some states such as Bulgaria subsequently determined that the ratification of the Convention was unconstitutional, Turkey officially withdrew from the Convention in July 2021, and Poland recently announced its wish to follow suit. In turn, the European Union (EU), the core values of which include democracy and fundamental rights, and which had a remarkable effect in developing policies against gender violence (Montoya 2013; Zippel 2006), now includes within its institutions – as heads of state in the European Council or as Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) – opponents to the Convention.

Frequently described as a champion for gender equality (van der Vleuten 2019), the European Parliament (EP) currently has a record-breaking representation of women MEPs (40.4 percent). Despite a setback in the 2010s (Jacquot 2015), the EP has shown steady support for gender equality (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín 2019). Nonetheless, the prevalent masculine

norms and gendered practices still shape MEPs' work as representatives (Berthet and Kantola 2021; Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2019; Lühiste and Kenny 2016).

As is the case with other gender issues, the Convention is contested in the EP. In this article, I scrutinize the EP, the role of which is to shape and politicize core issues such as gender equality and engage specifically with political groups as key players. The current EP (2019–2024) includes seven political groups ranging from the largest Christian-democratic European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the liberal group Renew Europe (Renew), the radical-right Eurosceptic Identity and Democracy group (ID), the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) to the far-left group European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL).

This article analyzes the discursive politics of contestation, between support and opposition, that characterize MEPs' debates about the EU's ratification of the Convention. It approaches contestations as part of a broader project to delegitimize the EU's supranational gender equality norms. Opposition to the Convention has previously been researched in the Council of Europe and in member states (Acar and Popa 2016; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018) but not in the EP in relation to the EU's ratification. This article fills this gap and contributes to the emerging literature on norm contestation by theoretically bridging feminist international relations (IR) concepts (Krook and True 2012) and concepts of support for and opposition to gender equality in the field of gender and politics (Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Verloo 2018). Theoretically, norms are "processes" (Krook and True 2012), and their meanings are continuously shaped by support, resistance, and opposition (Roggeband 2019).

Methodologically, my approach includes analyzing the framings used by agents acting either as norm promoters (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) or norm "antipreneurs" (Bloomfield 2016). I pay particular attention to direct and indirect forms of opposition to gender equality, well known among gender and politics scholars (Ahrens 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2021). The article employs a discursive approach that regards norms as sense-making practices, thus providing better leverage to understand the mechanisms involved in norm contestation and opposition to gender equality (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). These objectives underpin the following research questions: how are support for and opposition to the EU's ratification of the Convention constructed discursively by MEPs, and what are the effects of this cleavage on ratification and gender equality in the EP?

The research material consists of a total of 122 interviews with MEPs and parliamentary staff collected during the 8th and 9th legislative terms, as further explained below. Additionally, an examination of seven EP plenary debates about the EU's ratification complements the analysis. The findings show that, in an increasingly polarized EP (Kantola and Lombardo 2021),

MEPs either act as norm promoters or norm antipreneurs by framing their support for or opposition to ratification in ways that are heavily influenced by political considerations. In doing so, they reduce the space for considering the legal implications of such ratification. Four discursive constructions emerge from the analysis: ratification through ideas, ratification through legal considerations, ratification at the national level, and outright rejection. The effects of these discursive constructions for debating gender equality in the EP are highlighted through a discussion of both the internal and the external dynamics of contestation visible in discourse (Krook and True 2012), which are connected with direct and indirect forms of opposition to gender equality (Ahrens 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

Norm promoters and antipreneurs: studying support for and opposition to gender equality

Constructivist approaches to norms, influenced by the concept of a “norm life cycle,” are preoccupied with the dynamics of norm continuity and change (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and treat norms as fairly stable “things” (Krook and True 2012). On these approaches, successful norms can reach a final stage of internalization, but contestation is only understood as a mechanism that tailors new norms to a pre-existing normative environment (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). By contrast, a discursive approach to norms regards them as “processes” that are constantly produced, contested, and reproduced in a dynamic of support, compliance, opposition, and rejection in discourse (Krook and True 2012). This approach allows us to study forms of contestation with more precision than previously possible. In the literature, little is said about unsuccessful norms, other than concerning the few exceptions of non-existent norm entrepreneurship (Carpenter 2007), norms not achieving their intended effects (Krook and True 2012), norm resistance (Ün 2019), and the undermining strategy of norm “spoiling” (Sanders 2018). By contrast, scholars have extensively researched successful gender equality norms in the EU context, such as norms opposing sexual harassment (Zippel 2004, 2006) and trafficking (Locher 2007).

This article approaches norms as ongoing discursive constructions (Krook and True 2012), characterized by instability (Zwingel 2017). It explains why some norms, such as gender equality, are exposed to resistance repeatedly rather than at one particular moment (Chappell 2015; Roggeband 2019). Studying gender equality through norm theory reveals the politics of contestation and furthers our understandings of opposition to gender equality by considering “the oppositional dynamics between norm promoters and their counterforces that promote competing norms” (Roggeband 2019, 12). Thus, contestation lies in the discursive politics of norm competition (Krook and True 2012), which is central to the analysis of support for and opposition to the EU’s ratification of the Convention.

Using gender as an analytical category, feminist IR scholars show that norms and gender are constructed, contested, and reconstructed concepts (Kardam 2004). This approach highlights the processes underlying gender equality norm diffusion, transformation, and contestation. In this literature, contestation can serve to challenge the *status quo* for institutional change toward greater gender equality (Raymond et al. 2014) or can revert, change, or block gender equality norms (Roggeband 2019; Ün 2019). For instance, contestation can lead to less ambitious framings of gender equality in relation to reproductive rights (Zwingel 2017), gender mainstreaming (True and Mintrom 2001), and gender quotas (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012). Likewise, a globally adopted norm, such as support for quotas, may be blocked by political actors mobilizing tools that delegitimize or justify non-compliance in ways that make resistance understandable and desirable (Krook 2016). Debating the meaning of gender equality is central to the discursive politics of gender equality norm contestation and draws attention to the gendered power relations underlying resistance (Kardam 2004).

In this article, the contestation processes are key to understanding the discursive construction of a norm, particularly when actors attempt to block it. During contestation, norms can be not only reshaped but also distorted, emptied of their content (Krook and True 2012), and morally delegitimized by “justificatory discourses” (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2013). Such discourses question the fundamental validity of norms and typically emerge when actors belong to different normative communities (Bloomfield 2016). Here, the role of the norm antipreneur is pivotal to understanding the processes by which actors seek to block a norm (Bloomfield 2016). For them, the norm challenges the *status quo* in unacceptable ways, and by questioning the norm’s moral validity, they question its *raison d’être*. This highlights the norm antipreneur’s agency to discursively attack a norm, seeking its destruction.

From the existing scholarship, this article borrows the concept of norm promoters – or entrepreneurs (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) – to describe EP actors supporting ratification of the Convention and that of norm antipreneurs (Bloomfield 2016) to describe its opponents. This choice is motivated by the similarities observed between norm contestation research in IR and opposition to gender equality as identified in gender and politics research. While IR scholars speak of norm contestation when norm antipreneurs seek to undermine a norm, gender and politics scholars speak of opposition to gender equality when anti-gender actors seek to undermine gender equality policies.

Gender and politics scholars extensively document how anti-gender movements in Europe became a threat to existing gender equality policies and the development of new ones (Kováts 2017; Kováts and Pöim 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). Verloo (2018, 6)

defines opposition to gender equality as “any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and gender + equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policy-making at any stage.” This definition suggests that opposition is an activity or a process, similar to the processes of norm contestation studied in IR. Furthermore, gender and politics scholars discuss resistance in terms of struggles over the meanings of gender equality. They greatly contribute to the debate by adopting a deconstructive approach that shows how political discourses engender subjects through different meanings of gender equality (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; Verloo and Lombardo 2007). The different meanings attributed to gender equality, as an “empty signifier,” can be stretched, bent, and fixed to match particular political objectives (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). Thus, it is important to ask who has or should have a voice in the debate that defines what gender equality is and that determines how to solve gender inequalities. It is also important to look at how power clusters around certain meanings (Bacchi 2017). For instance, when studying developments in domestic violence policy in Poland, Hungary, and Romania, Krizsán and Roggeband (2017) find that struggles over the definition of domestic violence reveal forms of opposition to gender equality, with outcomes far removed from gender equality concerns. In subsequent work, they demonstrate how gender equality often collides with other pre-existing norms, such as democracy, within a normative environment. Said differently, opposition to gender equality norms is stronger in states where sovereignty and subsidiarity, rather than respect for human rights, define democracy (Roggeband and Krizsán 2018). In Poland, Hungary, and Romania, the official political discourse shifted from being supportive or silent on gender equality to “openly challenging previously adopted and accepted gender equality policy positions” (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018, 91). These developments followed a shift in the political landscape toward an increasing presence of radical-right populists. This finding suggests that power tends to cluster more around the norm of sovereignty than the norm of gender equality when democracy is most threatened (Lombardo and Kantola 2019). The rising number of radical-right populists throughout EU member states is also visible in the EP and shapes MEPs’ gender equality discourse.

Like discourses, processes of contestation do not occur in a vacuum but are embedded in their institutional and political contexts. First, IR scholars suggest that norm antipreneurs are strategically advantaged when political considerations weigh more heavily in their deliberations than legal considerations (Bloomfield 2016, 15), and norm sense-making processes in parliaments are loaded with competing political agendas. Second, the form of the opposition can be difficult to argue against. For instance, the sovereignty argument used to dismantle claims for a global norm is powerful because

sovereignty is the foundational norm upon which transnational relations, including the EU, rely. On the one hand, sovereignty rejects interference; on the other hand, it reinforces the position of states, albeit as autonomous, in a transnational system. Hence, it becomes almost impossible for norm promoters to argue against the sovereignty principle without risking undermining the very system that allows those norms to spread in the first place (Bloomfield 2016). This strategy of opposition is highlighted in the present analysis and partly explains why norm promoters fail to successfully counter norm antipreneurs. Third, EU institutions themselves comprise anti-gender actors that then shape the institutions. Ahrens (2018) extensively researched forms of direct and indirect opposition to gender equality in the daily functioning of EU institutions. Her findings show that indirect forms of opposition dominate EU institutions as political correctness mostly prevails. However, direct forms of opposition are encouraged by the adversarial style of argumentation in the EP (Ahrens 2018), and the rising number of radical-right populist MEPs leads to an increasing rejection of gender equality norms (Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

The most illustrative attack against gender equality is through the rhetoric of gender ideology, used by anti-gender actors to depict the norm as a foreign ideology and norm promoters as ideologues (Korolczuk 2021). This anti-feminist rhetoric claims to defend the heteronormative and traditional family where the sexual division of labor, education, and reproductive rights are based on conservative and gendered expectations (Kováts 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). This rhetoric is a justificatory discourse as it questions the fundamental validity of the norm (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2013).

Studying the contestation of norms in the European Parliament

The Convention was born in the Council of Europe and emerged in the EP as an international legally binding text to which the EU was offered accession. The Council of Europe is an independent international organization, of which EU member states are parties. In October 2015, the EU took the initiative by beginning to set out a legislative roadmap for the EU's ratification of the Convention. The EU can be bound by the provisions of an international text to the extent of its competence (Craig and de Búrca 2020). In case of agreement, ratification would *de facto* only cover those provisions within its competences – namely, judicial cooperation in criminal matters, and asylum and non-refoulment. Yet, the European Council, representing heads of member states in the EU, specified the legal basis for ratification in two separate decisions. This choice sparked criticism in the EP among norm promoters because it unnecessarily emphasized the narrowness of the EU's commitment to the Convention. In particular, the Council's decision diverged

from the EU's accession to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which the EU acceded as a bloc following its commitment to non-discrimination. The analysis shows that the scope of ratification was misunderstood by most norm antipreneur MEPs.

The European Commission, the EP, and the European Council have distinct roles and responsibilities in the decision-making process. In 2014, the EP introduced a legislative procedure on "Combating Violence against Women," requesting the Commission initiate the EU's ratification of the Convention. Regarding international agreements, the European Council takes the final decision following the EP's consent. At the time of writing, there is no agreement upon ratification. However, in anticipation, the EP has since 2014 supported ratification by adopting various resolutions on behalf of the parliamentary committees Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, and Women's Rights and Gender Equality. Although non-binding, these resolutions politicize specific issues (Corbett, Jacobs, and Neville 2016), and because they are debated, they shape the official EU discourse on ratification. As a result, the resolutions not only urge other EU institutions to pursue ratification but also help to test the waters and assess reactions within the EP.

The discourse on ratification is shaped by MEPs belonging to different political groups in the EP. Political groups are distinct from national political parties because they conglomerate MEPs from different national party delegations, making the EP unique. There were eight political groups in the 8th legislative term (2014–2019) when the issue of ratification first reached the EP. By order of size, the political groups comprised the diverse and conservative EPP, the socialist S&D, the traditional and conservative ECR, the liberal Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the Greens/EFA, the left GUE-NGL, and two smaller radical-right populist groups Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF).

In the 9th legislative term (2019–2024), ALDE became Renew, ENF became the radical-right populist group ID, and grew to rank fourth after the Greens/EFA and EFDD dissolved. Political groups are key to understanding the normative environment in which the EU's ratification of the Convention is analyzed. In particular, the groups constitute diverse and heterogeneous normative communities because MEPs from the same group come from different national contexts. The radical-right and populist groups ECR, EFDD, and ENF/ID had the most vocal MEP antipreneurs, who also came from member states where the Convention was contested.

With regards to gender equality norms, the EP is often described as a defender (van der Vleuten 2019). However, recent publications that precisely differentiate between political groups suggest that gender equality is increasingly contested and politicized (Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2019). For instance, gender equality norms were tested

when issues of sexual harassment surfaced in the EP, forcing political groups to position themselves as either supporting or opposing new anti-harassment policies (Berthet and Kantola 2021). By challenging the representation of the EP as a unified actor, these studies reveal instances of contestation within and between political groups, which gives nuance to previous understandings of supranational norm dynamics. Indeed, if supranational actors were previously seen as promoters of norms (such as Western understandings of democracy and human dignity), we now see instances of norm contestation and outright rejection within those institutions.

In this article, particular attention is paid to political groups because they comprise either different or similar normative communities (Wiener 2004) in which MEPs frame their support for or opposition to ratification. Additionally, the article shows that while MEPs may belong to the same political group, they may also have different understandings of a norm, or on the contrary, they may share the understanding of MEPs belonging to different political groups.

Methodology, methods, and research material

This article employs a discursive approach to analyze support and opposition by norm promoters and norm antipreneurs, respectively, in relation to the EU's ratification of the Convention. A feminist discursive approach to norms (Krook and True 2012) helps to understand these not as "things" but as processes constantly (re)produced in discourses. It allows us to study the underlying mechanisms in the politics of support or opposition and to assert that framings of gender equality norms matter in discourse (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009).

The analysis adopts a Foucauldian understanding of power (Foucault 1972, 1980) in which norms are not fixed but constantly constructed, deconstructed, and reproduced through discourse. The analysis takes into account the level of institutionalization of MEPs and staff and addresses the dynamics of contestation through their internal and external dimensions (Krook and True 2012) in the EU context. While agents powerfully frame the norms' content in ways that either expand or reverse them (internal dynamism), they are themselves also embedded in institutional contexts that provide either favorable or unfavorable political opportunities (external dynamism). These internal and external understandings of norm dynamisms helped methodologically in identifying and analyzing the four discursive constructions relevant to this article in ways that highlight the gendered structures at stake when debating gender equality in the EP. These constructions include opponents' direct and indirect strategies.

The research material consists of 122 interviews with MEPs and staff conducted during the 8th and 9th legislative terms in Brussels. The interviews are

part of a EUGenDem project on the gendered practices and policies of the EP's political groups,¹ which provides a necessary broader context to this research, particularly concerning unequal gendered practices in the EP. Interviews were semi-structured and followed a guide with questions about gender equality policies and practices of opposition to gender equality. Interviewees were MEPs, their assistants, and parliamentary and political group staff, and were representative of all political groups existing before and after the elections, covering both the 8th and 9th legislative terms, and of a full gender balance.

The Convention explicitly came up in 27 interviews, yet all 122 interviews helped to contextualize political groups and MEPs' support for and contestation of the EU's ratification. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and coded by members of the research team using Atlas.ti software, a computer-assisted tool for qualitative data analysis. Codes were developed deductively and inductively in several periodic team meetings, and research diaries were systematically used to ensure consistent interpretation of codes for all interviews. For the purposes of this article, the codes "Opposition to gender equality," "Opposition to gender equality gender ideology," and "Istanbul Convention" were selected and analyzed separately. Interviews are cited with the following pattern: (1) political group, (2) position in the EP, (3) gender, (4) Atlas.ti number (for example, S&D MEP F 56:8).

The analysis also includes a review of all EP debates in which the EU's ratification of the Convention was debated by all political groups to provide a fuller account of the issue. Unlike interviews, debates are public, and anonymization of MEPs is not required (EP 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). Thus, MEPs are named and quoted following this pattern: (1) political group, (2) specific debate (for example, EPP, EP 2017). Studying the debates required analyzing the frames of more than 533 oral and written interventions, in which MEPs use their own language. Translation of speeches relied on multi-lingual collaboration between members of the EUGenDem project, where meanings attributed in different languages to concepts such as gender equality were discussed. Analyzing both interviews and debates provides a more accurate representation of the full scope of support and opposition in the EP, and debates particularly help to illustrate radical-right populist MEPs' rhetoric (Brack 2017; Kantola and Lombardo 2021). Public debates are arenas in which norm antipreneurs can express their anti-gender views in ways that are visible to the electorate.

This large set of qualitative data allows a thorough analysis of the discursive politics of support for and opposition to the ratification of the Convention by drawing attention to the existence of gendered power relations within the EP's political groups. The analysis uses feminist theories of norm contestation and opposition to gender equality to identify four discursive constructions: ratification through ideas, ratification through legal

considerations, ratification at the national level, and outright rejection. The processes underlying and the actors behind them constitute the analytical focus of this article and are further developed in the following section.

Different forms of support among norm promoters

Ratification through ideas

In this discursive construction of ratification through ideas, MEPs legitimized the EU's ratification of the Convention in two main arguments: one stressing a "symbolic frame" whereby the EU should act as a role model, and one stressing a "substantive frame" in which the Convention is a significant achievement for gender equality.

First, the analysis shows that norm promoter MEPs constructed a symbolic frame to encourage the EU to act as a role model. This construction had the effect of supporting ratification by framing it in ways that aligned with the EU's values (external dimension). For instance, socialist MEP Christine Revault d'Allonnes Bonnefoy described ratification as "a strong commitment to protect women across Europe" (S&D, EP 2017). In 2016, most MEPs from the three largest political groups (the conservative EPP, socialist S&D, and liberal ALDE) assigned responsibility to the EU for leading the way. For instance, MEPs Catarina Chinnici from S&D, Gesine Meissner from ALDE, and Constance Le Grip from EPP all characterized ratification as sending "a clear message" (S&D, EP 2016a) and "a very strong signal" (ALDE, EP 2016a) to the member states, and putting "an additional pressure" on those delaying ratification (EPP, EP 2016a). In 2016, all member states had signed the Convention, but a few had yet to ratify. Likewise, conservative MEP Michel Dantin used strong words, saying that "the EU has a duty to implement exemplary standards for women's rights" (EPP, EP 2016b); he thus effectively supported ratification by associating it with the EU's commitment to gender equality (external dimension).

Second, support for ratification was shaped by a substantive frame in which the Convention was presented as progressive (internal dimension) because it linked violence against women with a deeply ingrained gendered power imbalance in society. For instance, MEP Manuel Bompard from GUE/NGL explained how ratification would encourage the EU "to be firmly committed to feminism and to fight patriarchy," and added that the Convention "recalls the systemic nature of violence against women," including against "migrant women, refugees, Roma, asylum-seekers, women with disabilities, trans and lesbians" (GUE/NGL, EP 2019b). This quotation stresses an intersectional awareness of the Convention's content, thereby strengthening the norm's meaning (internal dimension).

Furthermore, the use of human rights and anti-discrimination frames – known for ensuring the inclusion of issues of violence against women on

the international political agenda in the past (Montoya 2013) – were also visible in the EP and translated into the right to be free from violence. For instance, conservative MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt said that the Convention “is the first and only international legally binding act that criminalizes violence against women and recognizes gender-based violence as a breach of human rights and a form of discrimination” (EPP, EP 2017). This construction strengthened the definition of the norm (internal dimension) by legitimizing the content of the Convention and its focus on gendered inequalities. It also extended the scope of what it is possible to discuss when debating gender equality; for instance, it allowed discussing an intersectional approach.

By contrast, other MEPs from similar political groups (EPP and ALDE) resisted these views by framing the violence in gender-neutral terms (internal dimension), thus reducing the space for discussing gendered inequalities. For instance, conservative MEP Michaela Šojdrová supported ratification but stressed the importance of protecting the elderly, children, and the unborn from violence (EPP, EP 2016a). Liberal MEP María Teresa Giménez Barbat noted the danger of “underestim[ing] domestic violence directed at men and boys” (ALDE, EP 2017). The discursive construction of ratification through ideas, which defined ratification in ways that align it with pre-existing norms of gender equality, democracy, and other EU values, had the effect of legitimizing the existence of the norm both internally and externally (Krook and True 2012). However, another effect of this construction was to inflate the Convention’s scope in ways that did not resonate well with the normative environments of other MEPs.

Indeed, interviewees described how ratification was first received in the EP as a “watershed moment” among women’s rights supporters (Greens/EFA Staff F 1:11), and how it led to a situation in which optimistic promoters overlooked antipreneurs, still sidelined in the EP in 2016. One interviewee told us that ratification “was a dossier the Parliament had expected to be easy” (S&D Staff F 2:7). Thus, norm promoters, known for their commitment to gender equality, used ratification as an opportunity to put on the agenda other issues, far less established, such as abortion rights. One interviewee told us:

When we first started on the dossier ... we absolutely wanted to have an official EP position on abortion. It would say that preventing access to safe abortion was a form of violence against women. ... We were very enthusiastic. (S&D Staff F 2:7)

Arguably, early framings of ratification by norm promoters who sought to expand the meaning of the norm (internal dimension), combined with an external context of rising opposition to the Convention in member states (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), had the effect of providing antipreneurs an avenue for resistance in the EP (Fejerskov and Cold-Ravnkilde 2019). The above interviewee added that, in retrospect, “we feel the backlash because

we sort of inflated the real effects” (S&D Staff F 2:15). Thus, constructing ratification through ideas had the effect of amplifying, in discourse, the real effects of ratification in ways that catalyzed opposition to gender equality. This contrasts with the following construction, in which norm promoters supported ratification through legal rather than political considerations.

Ratification through legal considerations

This discursive construction marks a shift from the previous one because in this case ratification is constructed by assessing and legitimizing the scope of accession under EU law. Norm promoters used a “procedural frame” to center debates on the limited – but real – scope of ratification. Less ambitious than the previous one, in this construction, promoters framed their support by pinpointing only the elements of the Convention’s content that ratification would cover (internal dimension) and by describing those as within EU competences (external dimension). The analysis found that this construction carried the best chance of convincing reluctant MEPs by lifting debates above disagreements based on gender. However, in doing so, it reduced the space to debate the gendered structures responsible for gendered violence.

Some examples of this were visible in plenary debates and included specific mentions of the two areas in which EU competences apply: judicial cooperation in criminal matters, and asylum and non-refoulment. For instance, far-right Belgian MEP Helga Stevens specified that member states were responsible for protecting women against violence but supported ratification because “the EU can take additional action in this regard, for example in ... the field of judicial cooperation in criminal matters” (ECR, EP 2016a). Similarly, conservative Polish MEP Tadeusz Zwiefka said that he supported “accession of the EU ... which concerns its competences, i.e., cooperation in the field of justice and asylum” (EPP, EP 2017). These excerpts show how for some MEPs in right-wing conservative groups, this procedural frame allowed them to support ratification while staying away from contested claims about gendered inequalities that may have existed in their political groups.

Other MEPs, known in the EP for their involvement with gender equality issues, condemned the limited scope of ratification in ways that stressed its real effects. For instance, liberal MEP Angelika Mlinar said that she regretted “the Council’s decision not to accede to the Convention as much as possible, but to limit it to just a few chapters” (ALDE, EP 2017). Similarly, Polish MEP Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz expressed her disbelief “that the European Union, which is a world leader in promoting equality between women and men, has signed this convention to a very narrow extent” (EPP, EP 2018a). These quotations show that while most norm promoter MEPs followed a discourse of ratification through ideas, thereby magnifying the effect of ratification, others chose to acknowledge its limits in ways that made it more acceptable to

MEPs holding different normative views (Krook and True 2012). An effect of this construction was that norm promoters had to limit their claims against gendered inequalities in order to not appear as a threat to norm antipreneurs.

Similarly, the interview material showed that using legal mechanisms helped norm promoters to avoid appearing as a threat after the emergence of strong opposition. One interviewee said, “We might’ve made a mistake in how we took charge of the issue. ... We presented it as a true victory, whereas it’s only a legal step ... whose effects are thin” (S&D Staff F 2:15). This quotation is evidence of the fact that early framings of ratification inflated its real impact on EU law and were met with strong resistance. It led to a situation where ratification could not be debated through feminist claims of gendered inequalities. It forced norms promoters to retreat down the legal road, notably in 2019 by petitioning the Court of Justice of the EU for its opinion on ratification. This is reflected in the following quotation: “I prefer to be the one that freezes the negotiation for a year in order to know, at least, whether we are legally sound or not, before continuing the discussions” (S&D Staff F 2:2). This quotation indicates that the EU’s role in promoting gender equality through ratification could not be debated anymore. By 2019, the issue was out of control as member states, such as Poland, started to voice their intent to withdraw from the Convention, and the polarization of debates in the EP justified bringing the issue to court. The threat of member states withdrawing immediately delegitimized debating the issue in the EP. The Court adopted its decision in October 2021.²

Lastly, the interview material stressed the existence of institutional resistance within the Parliament in relation to ratification. In the following quotation, one interviewee explained how the administration seemed reluctant to approach the Court and refused to share documents with MEPs in charge of ratification:

It is a real administrative resistance. ... It’s up to them to officially request an opinion from the Court ... I was told “The legal services are on it” – so I thought, fine! And now I hear ... that ... they completely refuse to let us see what documents were actually sent to the Court. (S&D Staff F 2:5)

This quotation illustrates a form of indirect opposition to gender equality, in the shape of inertia, well known among gender and politics scholars, in the sense that norm promoters often face covert but deeply ingrained institutional resistance, blocking changes and contributing to implementation gaps more efficiently than overt resistance (Ahrens 2018).

Different forms of opposition among norm antipreneurs

Ratification at the national level

The discursive construction of ratification at the national level was one of two constructions that opposed the EU’s ratification of the Convention. In this

case, MEPs were norm antipreneurs. They did not question the Convention's content nor its moral validity (internal dimension), as other MEPs did in outright rejection, but instead disagreed with supranational ratification (external dimension). This resistance opposed EU integration and was thus mostly visible among far-right and Eurosceptic political groups. Among gender and politics scholars, these groups are known for using indirect forms of opposition to gender equality by invoking subsidiarity (Ahrens and van der Vleuten 2019; Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

The principle of subsidiarity allows for EU actions only if and when action at the national level is less preferable. The findings show that MEPs opposed the norm in its external dimensions by deliberately choosing to emphasize a competing norm: the subsidiarity principle. They articulated either an illegitimacy frame, where the EU was portrayed as not being able to legitimately ratify the Convention, or a redundancy frame, where supranational ratification was unnecessary because national legislation sufficed. Both constructions were indirect forms of opposition to gender equality, where subsidiarity or views of achieved equality prevailed (Ahrens 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

This indirect form of opposition contrasted with outright rejection because in this case norm antipreneurs did not use anti-gender arguments but instead questioned the EU's legitimacy in ratifying the Convention. To some extent, they agreed with the internal dimensions of the norm (in other words, its content) but not with its ratification at the EU level. For instance, in the following quotations, MEPs from the three far-right Eurosceptic EP groups sought to undermine the EU from within. Brexiteer MEP Jonathan Arnott from EFDD said, "Whilst I fully support the aims of the Convention, I do not believe I should legitimize the [EU] in signing international conventions" (EFDD, EP 2016b). Likewise, German MEP Arne Gericke from ECR said, "It is not up to the EU to sign such an agreement on behalf of its member states – regardless of the accuracy of its content" (ECR, EP 2016b). MEP Nicolas Bay from ENF added, "Although the resolution's objectives are admirable ... the EU has no diplomatic legitimacy to ratify such a convention" (ENF, EP 2016b). These quotations show that MEPs powerfully and strategically constructed the norm's external dimensions in ways that did not allow for either ratification or debating it. These groups prioritized a competing norm, that of subsidiarity. Notably, this was the result of a choice made by powerful actors; it was not "inevitable or straightforward" (Krook and True 2012, 111). By contrast, MEP Jean Arthuis from ALDE believed that "guaranteeing and promoting equality between women and men is an indisputable objective of the EU, guaranteed by the Treaties" (ALDE, EP 2016b).

Additionally, norm antipreneurs framed a redundancy argument. They contested ratification by arguing that member states either had already ratified or had similar legislation, which automatically made supranational

ratification unnecessary. For instance, Hungarian MEP Kinga Gál from the conservative EPP opposed ratification because Hungary had stricter regulation (EPP, EP 2019b). Austrian MEP Georg Mayer from ID argued against the EU's ratification because Austria had already ratified it (ID, EP 2019b).

As explained above, both frames of illegitimacy and frames of redundancy contested the external dimensions of the norm and suggested that gender equality is best achieved at the national level. However, an effect of this construction was to reduce the space for debates on gender equality in the EP and to disguise opposition to gender equality behind Eurosceptic arguments. Indeed, one MEP said that “the subsidiarity principle says very clearly where are the EU competences” to justify her opposition to ratification, before adding that if MEPs “drafting these resolutions in the EP” really wanted “to defend women, to defend children, to defend victims of whatever violations,” they should not do this by drawing attention to such “controversial” issues, before concluding “This is the only way how we can keep the EU together” (EPP MEP F 64:22). Thus, framing resistance through the subsidiarity principle enabled norm antipreneurs to oppose ratification without being perceived as opponents of gender equality. It constituted an indirect form of opposition to gender equality (Ahrens 2018) and confirmed that the boundaries between a norm's internal and external dimensions are blurred (Krook and True 2012). Indirect forms of opposition to a “controversial” norm (internal dynamism) can be materialized in discourse by questioning its validity within its normative environment (external dynamism).

Outright rejection

This discursive construction was the second and most explicit of the two constructions opposing the EU's ratification. In this case, norm antipreneurs attacked the norm by arguing that it represented a gender ideology (internal dimension). It was a direct form of opposition to gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

Processes of contestation were clearly and indisputably opposed to the norm itself, not merely its ratification by the EU. Forms of contestation were gendered and racialized. They ranged from accusing the Convention of introducing a gender ideology into society to accusing it of opening the floods of migrants into Europe (Bardella ID, EP 2019b). By attacking the Convention's content, MEPs delegitimized its validity (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2013) with the aim of destroying it. This construction highlighted a misunderstanding of the Convention and of the meaning of “gender” as MEPs rarely justified their claim with a content-based reading of the text. Their objective was exclusively to distort, reverse, and empty the norm of its content (Krook and True 2012).

Contestation was framed in various ways and often through extreme and confusing terms. For instance, German populist MEP Beatrix von Storch from EFDD said, “Whoever agrees to this nonsense is probably on drugs” (EFDD, EP 2016a). In the interviews, the Convention was described as “a stupid paper” (Renew MEP F 39:26, referring to a discussion with a male Bulgarian MEP from ECR), “a mental framework” (ECR MEP M 36:24), and “a door opener for gender mainstreaming” (ID Staff M 56:7). These were manifest illustrations of how the Convention was unequivocally dismissed as too feminist, “too militant, too political” (ECR MEP M 36:24), and as having the aim of destroying “the traditional Christian society” (MEP Tomašić ECR, EP 2017). Yet, MEPs never justified their claims with reference to the text. Their aim was to reject the norm entirely and end debates on gender-related topics in the EP.

Gender and politics scholars have extensively contextualized gender policy progress and regress in ways that highlight the influence of conservative and religious actors, who often mobilize against transnational definitions of gender (Chappell 2015) by reinforcing traditional gendered family values (Ayoub 2014). As the Convention establishes a link between gender and violence against women, it is particularly prone to producing such contestation (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), in particular by radical-right populist groups (Berthet and Kantola 2021).

Notably, in this discourse, most norm antipreneurs first exposed their support for ending violence against women before expressing their opposition to the Convention, thus ignoring rooted gendered inequalities as a cause of violence. For instance, Polish MEP Jadwiga Wiśniewska from far-right ECR said, “We are all against violence against women,” before adding that “the definition of crimes covered by the Convention will be contaminated by gender ideology” (ECR, EP 2016a). Similarly, Bulgarian far-right MEP Angel Dzhambazki said, “We are against violence against women, of course,” and added, “but quite obviously in this document there is ... a gender ideology” (ECR, EP 2018a). Likewise, Croatian MEP Ivana Maletić from EPP said, “We need to fight violence against women by all means and to achieve full equality,” and then added, “but I abstained ... in view of the gender ideology” (EPP, EP 2016b).

These quotations highlight a paradox: while MEPs, including those of the far right, acknowledged the imperative to tackle violence against women, thereby strengthening it as an established policy field in the EP, their framings not only silenced but removed the gendered aspects of such violence. As a result, this construction strengthened the established norm of ending violence against women by reinforcing it as a respected norm in the international arena (Raymond et al. 2014) but refuted its gendered dimensions.

Additionally, this construction displayed misunderstandings of “gender,” with some MEPs denying the existence of gendered violence. For instance, some far-right populist MEPs believed that gender “is a part of science”

(ECR MEP F 82:10) – a biological fact, not a political issue to be debated (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). Croatian MEP Ruža Tomašić from ECR said that ratification would already be enacted if the Convention “focused only on protecting women from violence, without promoting gender ideology” (ECR, EP 2018a). Likewise, Croatian conservative MEP Ivica Tolić from EPP suggested that “in the implementation of the protection of women, it is not necessary to emphasize the notion of gender” (EPP, EP 2016b) since this notion contradicted his beliefs. In EPP, some had doubts that gender violence existed at all since men are victims too (EPP MEP F 49:9). These quotations show how some far-right MEPs advocated a gender-neutral definition of the violence (internal dimension), thereby disconnecting it from gendered inequalities and delegitimizing the norm.

As the largest group in the Parliament, EPP is diverse and comprises heterogeneous MEPs who do not necessarily belong to the same normative community. MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt from EPP carefully attended to these internal divisions:

I understand ... the controversy surrounding the word “gender.” You know how much, throughout the process, I reached out with genuine goodwill to clarify, bridge the gap, and leave no misunderstanding. ... It is not an ideology; it has no hidden agenda; there is definitely nothing against Christian or family values. (EPP, EP 2017)

Similarly, the interview material also revealed internal disagreements in the socialist group. While most S&D MEPs were supportive, one interviewee recalled a disagreement that she had had with a Bulgarian colleague: “Over and over again, there were attacks that the Convention would destroy the core family. And this ... showed among us, too ... [Named MEP] ... from Bulgaria – he said he cannot ... agree, because this destroys the healthy family” (S&D MEP F 34:37).

These quotations show that internal disagreements within political groups are common, and that gender issues shed light on the different normative communities within one political group. In that sense, MEPs’ national party delegations are important because they may indicate the presence of anti-gender actors, such as in Romania, Poland, and Hungary (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018).

Conclusion

This article has contributed to feminist IR debates on norm contestation and to discussion by gender and politics scholars of opposition to gender equality by analyzing the discursive politics of contestation between norm promoters and norm antipreneurs regarding the EU’s ratification of the Convention in the EP. The findings have offered insights about MEPs and political groups’

approaches to gendered violence policies by stressing their discursive strategies in support and opposition.

First, the analysis identified and analyzed four discursive constructions to show the different levels of support among norm promoters and different levels of opposition among norm antipreneurs. Second, the analysis highlighted norm sense-making processes by analyzing MEPs' framings through the internal and external dimensions framework (Krook and True 2012) in the EU context, which helped to draw conclusions on the effect of these on debating gender equality in the EP. Internally, we saw MEPs debating the content of the norm as progressive in the case of ratification through ideas and as controversial in the case of outright rejection. Externally, we saw MEPs debating EU competences and the scope of ratification in the case of ratification through legal considerations, and MEPs representing ratification as illegitimate in the case of ratification at the national level. The findings have shown that ratification through ideas encapsulated a symbolic discourse that put forward the EU as a role model, while ratification at the national level encapsulated a discourse of illegitimacy in which the subsidiarity principle prevailed. The outright rejection construction expressed opposition at its strongest as the Convention was perceived as pure "gender ideology." Finally, ratification through legal considerations was a procedural frame where ratification was legally assessed through the scope of accession. This construction's lack of visibility showed how political considerations dominated debates in the EP about the EU's ratification of the Convention.

The findings have shown that, in an increasingly polarized EP, the discursive constructions of support for ratification included ratification through ideas and ratification through legal considerations; and the discursive constructions of opposition included ratification at the national level and outright rejection, which were analyzed as part of a broader project to contest and delegitimize EU supranational gender equality norms. Focusing on the EP's political groups, the article has considered MEPs' different normative communities. It has found striking differences *between* political groups, with, on the one hand, the socialist S&D, liberal ALDE or Renew, the Greens/EFA, and the far-left GUE/NGL largely supporting ratification, and on the other, the far-right, nationalist, populist, and Eurosceptic groups such as ECR, ENF, EFDD, and ID largely opposing it. The findings have also highlighted differences *within* political groups. In particular, the biggest, most diverse, and heterogeneous group, the conservative EPP, comprises MEPs with different views on ratification. Within EPP, the analysis found both norm promoters supporting ratification through ideas and norm antipreneurs opposing ratification by outright rejection. This finding suggested that beyond political groups, national party delegations shape MEPs' normative community in relation to the Convention. As we know

from gender and politics scholars' research, anti-gender rhetoric mostly developed in Central Eastern Europe countries (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), and within one political group MEPs from some national party delegations may belong to a different normative community than the rest of the group.

The article has noted a significant shift between 2016 and 2019. In 2016, most MEPs called for EU action, and opposition was sidelined. Between 2017 and 2018, opposition grew, and the strategy of norm promoters shifted to stress the real but thin effects of ratification. By 2019, the opposition was out of control, with member states threatening to withdraw. In the same year, norm promoters brought the issue to court to freeze political debate. This shift demonstrates the power of the opposition to gender equality and the need to further research the processes behind the discursive politics of contestation in the field of gender and politics. Considering that the rhetoric of gender ideology was not observed as a strategy to oppose the Convention during its drafting process (Acar and Popa 2016), future research could incorporate the discursive shift, as noted in the present article, in a broader comparative analysis of the debates in the Council of Europe and the EP before and after 2016.

Notes

1. "Gender, Party Politics and Democracy in Europe: A Study of the European Parliament's Party Groups." See <https://projects.tuni.fi/eugendem/>.
2. For more, see Court of Justice of the European Union, Opinion 1/19, October 6, 2021, Luxembourg.

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Notes on contributor

Valentine Berthet is a PhD researcher in the research project EUGenDem, funded by the European Research Council, at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Finland. Her research focuses on the gender violence policies of the European Parliament's political groups and covers issues of sexual harassment and restrictions to abortion rights in the European Union. Her work has been published in *Social Politics* and the *European Journal for Women's Studies*.

ORCID

Valentine Berthet  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5447-1180>

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PUBLICATION II

United in crisis: abortion politics in the European Parliament and political groups' disputes over EU values

Valentine Berthet

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United in Crisis: Abortion Politics in the European Parliament and Political Groups' Disputes over EU Values

VALENTINE BERTHET 

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere

Abstract

Safe and legal access to abortion is precondition for gender equality. Yet, in many EU Member States they remain controversial, endangered or absent. Recently, the European Parliament passed a resolution articulating a defence for a right to abortion in the EU: the Matić resolution. Via an analysis of debates and parliamentary processes around the resolution, this article analyses the different discursive constructions of a right to abortion within the EP by political groups, the different meanings attributed to EU values during abortion debates, and the impact of these constructions on gender equality policymaking in the EP. It found that internal attacks on abortion were increasingly constructed as alien to EU values despite efforts by opponents to reframe such values. Although EU values are undefined, attempts to renegotiate a common EU identity around shared values, even symbolically, are possible because they are dynamic and prone to facilitating unity during crises.

Keywords: abortion; European Parliament; European values; political groups; discourses; opposition

Introduction

In June 2021, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a new resolution on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), demanding a right to safe and legal abortion within the EU. This article is the first scholarly analysis of the Matić resolution on 'the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health',¹ named after its rapporteur Fred Predrag Matić, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D).

Often described in the literature as a 'real champion for gender equality' (Locher, 2012, p. 68) and 'a strong supporter for gender justice' (van der Vleuten, 2019, p. 49), the EP and its Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) have put gendered issues on the EU's political agenda rather consistently (Ahrens, 2016; Montoya, 2013). One recent example includes the adoption of several resolutions in favour of the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and domestic violence (Berthet, 2022). However, recent research has found an increasing number of anti-gender MEPs, amounting to approximately 30 per cent since the 2019 EP elections (Zacharenko, 2020). These MEPs employ various direct and indirect strategies for opposing gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020), thus making EP debates more polarized on gendered issues (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020). Empirically, such opposition has been studied on issues such as SRHR (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustin, 2016),

¹EP resolution, 24 June 2021 (2020/2215(INI)).

gender-based violence (Berthet, 2022; Berthet and Kantola, 2021) and human rights (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). This article brings new perspectives by arguing that despite the opposition to gender and despite the controversiality of abortion in politics (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022), a progressive discourse on abortion still had validity in the European Parliament.

A key contribution of this article is to demonstrate that abortion rights were debated within the framework of EU values, albeit under different meanings. The article argues that EU values, although described as ambiguous (Mos, 2020), can be interpreted in a way that gather consensus amongst political groups around an issue as controversial as abortion rights. Even more so when restrictions to abortion right are constructed as a threat to the EU's unity. Such consensus was, however, reached at the cost of constructing some Member States as backward.

Eight years after the previous report on SRHR, the 2013 Estrela report, which was not adopted, the adoption of the Matić resolution showed that abortion was still politicized in the EP as an issue relevant to the EU. Despite a lack of competence in the area, MEPs supported demands for its protection at the EU level. Specifically, this came as a response to a recent ban in Poland that restricted access to abortion (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). This ban is understood here as part of a global backlash against reproductive rights (Gilby and Koivusalo, 2020), trans-gender rights and gender equality in Europe (Verloo and Paternotte, 2018) by anti-gender movements particularly strong in some Member States for dismantling equality policies (Krizsán and Roggeband, 2018).

This article focuses on the EP's political groups as key players in shaping and politicizing issues and thus does not regard the Parliament as one unified actor but rather as characterized by tensions and contradictions within and among political groups (Kantola *et al.*, 2022). There were seven political groups in the ninth legislature, under study here, ranging from the largest Christian-Democrats European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the liberal Renew Europe (Renew), the radical-right Eurosceptic Identity and Democracy (ID), the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the far-left European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL).

The article has four main objectives: analysing the parliamentary processes leading to the adoption of the Matić resolution; analysing the different constructions of a right to abortion in the EU by political groups; analysing the different meanings attributed to EU values during abortion debates; and analysing the impact of these constructions on gender equality policymaking in the EP. Underpinning these objectives, the article asks: First, how is a right to abortion in the EU constructed by political groups? Second, how are EU values instrumentally used during abortion debates? Third, what impact do these constructions have on supranational gender-equality policymaking in the EP?

The article contends that EU values are largely undefined and lack enforcement, which explains how they can be used in detrimental ways (Mos, 2020). However, attempts to renegotiate a common EU identity around shared values, even symbolically, are possible because they are dynamic, open for reinterpretation, applicable in different contexts and periods and prone to facilitating unity during crises (Eigenmann, 2021). Thus, to analyse the constructed meanings of EU in abortion debates, the research material consists of first, parliamentary documents and debates about the adoption of the Matić resolution, and second, supplementary debates relevant to abortion rights in the EU.

I. Constructing EU Values and Opposition to Gender Equality

Constructivist approaches to studying EU integration processes around shared values analyse the role of meanings, norms and discourses to better understand the processes that stop or boost cooperation between Member States (Lombardo, 2016). These processes matter because they help to understand how Member States move closer together around a common understanding of shared values or further apart due to disagreements over the meaning of these values. Thus, a discursive approach to studying EU values regards them as constructed, and sheds light on discursive struggles or competing narratives (Smismans, 2010) at play when debating their meanings. Described as ‘polysemic’ (Foret and Calligaro, 2018, p. 13), EU values have different meanings ‘according to the time and space of their enunciation’ (Foret and Calligaro, 2018, p. 6). Their meaning is not fixed but rather continuously changing.

EU values have no clear definition but have a normative function. They have become a rhetorical tool to mark boundaries between ‘others’ and ‘self’ in international affairs (Foret and Calligaro, 2018, p. 11) and internally, as this article finds. EU values were used to mark the EU ‘as a beacon of fundamental rights protection’ (Smismans, 2010) and gender equality as a founding element of the European Project (MacRae, 2010). Whilst the values of respect for human rights and equality between women and men, as well as democracy and respect for the rule of law are enshrined in the founding Treaty of the EU, they remain ambiguous. Scholars have argued that this ambiguity has led to their crisis (Mos, 2020). For instance, they can be interpreted to defend competing political projects, such as European integration versus nationalism.

By defining ‘supposedly shared standards in self-serving ways’ (Mos, 2020, p. 274), their meanings can be reinterpreted in ways that weaken closer collaboration between Member States. Via reframing and norm contestation, politicians accused of breaching EU values can pretend to be their true defenders by reinterpreting their meaning in self-serving ways (Mos, 2020). For instance, the democracy value can be regarded as protecting Member States’ sovereignty, thus matching nationalistic intentions. From this perspective, several democratic crises experienced by the EU and described in the literature as ‘democratic backsliding’ are rooted in such crisis of EU values (Mos, 2020).

In contrast, however, scholars have argued that crises, such as when nationalistic projects clash with supranational cooperation, are not necessarily detrimental to the construction or strengthening of progressive, shared values. Rather, the threat posed by nationalist and Eurosceptic movements have made the search for a common European identity around shared values imperative (Eigenmann, 2021). This has strengthened efforts to uphold progressive norms as opposed to conservative ones, and some equality norms, such as LGBTIQ+ rights, have been institutionalized.

Laura Eigenmann found that support for LGBTIQ+ rights has strengthened a sense of community and marked a distinction between progressive ‘self’ and Eurosceptic, right-wing nationalist ‘others’ within the EU (Eigenmann, 2021, p. 3). Symbolic endorsements of equality norms, such as nonbinding resolutions or the display of LGBTIQ+ rights flags in institutional settings, were found to have long-lasting effects on the development of a common identity (Eigenmann, 2021).

Likewise, gender equality is a norm supported by the EU. It was improved in Member States through EU legislation – that is, sexual harassment (Zippel, 2004). Simultaneously,

opposition to gender equality is growing with the increasing presence of nationalist, radical-right movements (Verloo and Paternotte, 2018). The status of gender equality as one EU value is increasingly debated. In the EP, research has found that indirect forms of opposition include embedding gender equality in Eurosceptic and subsidiarity debates, bending it towards other issues (for example immigration), depoliticizing it by recurring to biology arguments and resorting to self-victimizing and blame-game allegations, pulling the focus away from debating gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020).

The most explicit form of opposition to gender equality is via the rhetoric of 'gender ideology', through which anti-gender actors seek to produce an alternative knowledge on equality rights (Korolczuk, 2020; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). This anti-feminist/trans rhetoric claims to defend heteronormative and nuclear families in which the sexual division of labour, education and reproductive rights are based on conservative and gendered expectations (Kováts, 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

Reproductive rights became a key target of anti-gender movements (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). As an issue prone to contestation, like the Istanbul Convention on violence against women (Berthet, 2022; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021), the abortion issue is likely to produce a strong anti-gender reaction. Notably, in Poland, abortion 'became an important theme in the war on gender' (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 78) since backsliding and de-democratization processes have led to the dismantlement of gender-equality policies, which has mainly affected reproductive rights (Krizsán and Roggeband, 2018).

Typically embedded in Euroscepticism, disintegration and nationalistic discourses, opposition to gender equality was instrumentally used by anti-gender actors to oppose the EU. Notably, Brussels was depicted as contaminating Member States with a gender ideology, as the Ebola virus contaminates bodies (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). These developments matter because opposition to gender equality and abortion affects democracy. Conflicts around 'gender' are truly about negotiating what the future of democracy will be (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022), including that of the EU.

In the EP, various direct and indirect forms of opposition to gender equality in discourse and practice have been theorized as red flags able to quickly signal the risks of European disintegration. Indeed, attitudes towards gender equality policies are regarded as 'a litmus test for the whole integration process' and 'an indicator of the democratic health of the EU' (Lombardo and Kantola, 2019, p. 62). Therefore, it matters for the future of the EU to better understand how support for or opposition to a supranational right to abortion is embedded in EU values.

This article adopts a discursive approach to EU values and regards them as processes rather than fixed in their meaning. Like norms, EU values are best understood as processes, namely continuously renegotiated in discourse (Krook and True, 2012). Whilst their ambiguity can be exploited to redefine their content in conservative terms (Mos, 2020), it also ensures flexibility, wide applicability, adjustment to social shifts and support for equality norms (Eigenmann, 2021). In this sense, EU values are in a constant state of crisis and need frequent revisions. As this article shows, they can be strategically framed to support a right to abortion in the EU, even if only symbolically.

Further, previous research found differences in how political groups discuss the EU value of respect for human rights. The groups S&D, Greens/EFA, GUE-NGL and Renew considered gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights as universal and indivisible human

rights and were thus defined as defenders. In contrast, the ECR and ENF/ID reframed human rights with anti-gender and homophobic arguments and were thus defined as reframers. Finally, the EPP group was best characterized by internal conflicts based on National Party Delegations (NPDs), with a less consistent common position and was defined as ‘sitting on the fence’ (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). As a result, political groups hold different positions on EU values and these matter for EU integration. Analysing EU values in relation to abortion debates adds to these findings because, as a controversial issue, abortion is likely to trigger strong reaction on EU integration and the meanings of EU values. Thus, abortion debates constitute a relevant site to study the attribution of meanings to EU values by political groups.

II. Background: Abortion Politics in the European Parliament

Traditionally regarded as beyond the scope of EU gender equality policymaking (Jacquot, 2015), abortion was increasingly politicized in the EP as an internal cross-cutting and a core issue since the 2013 Estrela report, as explained below. During the ninth legislature (2019–24), the issue of abortion was particularly visible as MEPs expressed increasing concerns about backlashes in Europe. For instance, in February 2021 alone, abortion was discussed as a cross-cutting issue during a plenary debate on the ‘challenges ahead for women’s rights’,² and as a core issue during a plenary debate on the ‘de facto ban on abortion in Poland’.³ Abortion is under-researched in the academic literature on European politics but remains a salient issue in the EP (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustin, 2016). Because political groups are key actors in problematizing policy issues (Bacchi, 2009), it matters to analyse how they discursively construct abortion rights in the EU and how their constructions paved the way to the Matić resolution’s adoption.

Before the 2021 Matić resolution, safe and legal abortion was discussed as an internal non-binding policy area twice: the 2002 Van Lancker resolution and the 2013 Estrela report. These two reports were initiated by MEPs from the S&D group and were put on the agenda of FEMM. First, the 2002 Van Lancker resolution, drafted by Belgian MEP Anne van Lancker from the PES group (S&D predecessor), was the first parliamentary text to defend abortion rights in the EU. It included both progressive and conservative provisions. For instance, it recommended access to safe and legal abortion services for all, but also highlighted the physical and psychological health risks supposedly involved with abortion. Following its adoption at the committee level with only a few amendments, the resolution was adopted in plenary by 280 votes in favour, 240 against and 28 abstentions (Mondo and Close, 2019). Passed before the 2004 enlargement, global and European anti-choice organizations targeted the text as they believed it imposed the legalization of abortion on EU candidate countries (Zacharenko, 2020). Yet the text was not as harshly condemned in the EP as was the 2013 Estrela report.

Drafted by Portuguese MEP Éдите Estrela from the S&D group, the Estrela report was severely rejected in plenary and never became a resolution. Its provisions adopted a

²EP plenary debate, 10.02.21, available at: [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/2509\(RSP\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/2509(RSP)&l=en)

³EP plenary debate, 9.02.21, available at: [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/2537\(RSP\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/2537(RSP)&l=en)

progressive rights-based approach and emphasized the EU's role in the areas of public health and non-discrimination. Notably, it noted that as a human right and public health concern, high-quality abortion services should be legal, safe and accessible to everyone, including non-resident women. First adopted in FEMM after the 217 amendments – which at the time constituted the biggest number of amendments FEMM had ever received (Mondo and Close, 2019) – the report was then debated in plenary. It met harsh resistance. Anti-choice organizations lobbied MEPs against the adoption of the text. One estimation suggested that between 80,000 and 100,000 emails, including threats, were sent to MEPs who supported the text (Zacharenko, 2020).

In the Parliament, anti-choice MEPs strongly opposed the text, sometimes openly and sometimes indirectly, by hiding their opposition to the right behind subsidiarity arguments. Johanna Kantola and Lise Rolandsen Agustin demonstrated how political groups' discourses were polarized around two axes whilst debating the 2013 Estrela report (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustin, 2016). Whilst the S&D and GUE/NGL constructed reproductive rights as a woman's right to self-determination, the EPP and ECR focused on the right of the unborn, the right of conscientious objection and the sovereignty of Member States.

After a difficult plenary debate and pressure from the EPP and ECR, the draft was sent back to FEMM for revision. When the revised 'watered-down' version (Zacharenko, 2020, p. 58) came back to the plenary, two alternative reports were added to the vote. The EPP and ECR groups joined forces to draft an alternative report that stressed Member States' competencies on the issue, whilst the EFDD group (dissolved after the 2019 EP elections) drafted an openly anti-choice alternative report. The report drafted by the EPP and ECR groups, albeit 'completely devoid of content' (Zacharenko, 2020, p. 58), was adopted by 334 votes in favour, 327 against and 35 abstentions instead of the Estrela report.

This shows that in 2013, the issue was highly controversial and generated a backlash from groups opposing the report. The parliamentary debates triggered contestations within and among political groups but also created coalitions between groups (for example the EPP and ECR). It matters to study how these tensions and coalitions between groups played out in the ninth legislature, where an increasing number of anti-gender MEPs (Zacharenko, 2020), radical-right populist groups (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020) and a greater polarization of debates on gendered issues reshaped the political landscape.

III. Methodology and Research Material

This article is a qualitative study of the parliamentary processes leading to the adoption of the 2021 Matic resolution and of the political groups' discursive struggles when debating abortion rights in the EU. Because groups systematically appealed to EU values, albeit under different meanings, it matters to analyse the discursive constructions of both 'abortion rights' and 'EU values'.

The analysis follows a constructivist, interpretivist, and discourse-inspired methodology (Bevir, 2006; Lindekilde, 2014). This means that the discursive practices behind the attribution of meanings to concepts of 'abortion rights' and 'EU values' are regarded as a conceptual dispute between actors (Lombardo *et al.*, 2009). These concepts have different meanings, which are continuously resisted and reproduced in discourse

(Bacchi, 2009). For instance, the meaning of gender equality can be stretched to include other goals, bent away from equality and towards other goals, or fixed under specific meanings (Lombardo *et al.*, 2009). Within this deconstructive approach, discursive practices are understood as powerful and meaning-constitutive (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). Therefore, the analysis focuses on the different discursive practices that attribute meanings to disputed concepts rather than determining prevalence or incidence (Luborsky and Rubinstein, 1995).

The research material consists of all committee/plenary debates and all policy documents leading to the adoption of the Matic resolution. It includes, for instance, the two FEMM meetings during when the draft report was debated before and after amendments and one plenary debate during when the report was debated by all MEPs. The official EP documents include, for instance, the draft report, the committee's amendments and the two alternative texts. The material also includes the political groups' press releases about the Matic resolution (when available), as they illustrate the importance each political group gives to the issue. Furthermore, the material consists of a supplementary dataset of other debates about a right to abortion in the EU during the ninth legislature (2019–24). Debates were sampled purposively by selecting only those, within the selected timeframe, that directly or indirectly dealt with a right to abortion in the EU. A first search for parliamentary debates included an online search via keywords such as 'gender equality', 'women's rights', 'reproductive rights' and 'abortion.' Only debates pertaining to EU's internal affairs were selected, thus excluding debates like the 'EU strategy to put an end to female genital mutilation around the world'.⁴ Amongst the seven debates selected for closer analysis, a closer search for 'reproductive rights' and 'abortion' allowed the selection of specific speeches pertaining to a right to abortion in the EU. Although these debates did not belong to the parliamentary processes leading to the Matic resolution, they paved the way for its adoption by contributing to shaping discourse on abortion rights within the EU. They include debates directly related to the topic, like 'abortion rights in Poland',⁵ and indirectly related, like 'the impact of COVID-19 measures on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law'.⁶

The research material was analysed using *AtlasTi*, a software for qualitative data analysis. The code list was first developed deductively, based on prior knowledge from concepts and theories (for example the code 'Opposition to gender equality_direct'), and revised inductively after observation of the data (for example the code 'Democratic perspective_rule of law') (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Due to the public availability of these debates and documents, anonymising the names of MEPs was not required. Therefore, the analysis refers directly to the MEP's name and political groups when citing them. Citations are referenced with the following pattern: (1) MEP name; (2) political group; (3) *Atlas. Ti* number (sometimes the MEP's name appears in the main text). When more than one political group appears in the citation reference

⁴EP plenary debate, 18.12.2019, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-12-18-ITM-024_EN.html

⁵EP plenary debate, 25.11.2020, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-11-25-ITM-012_EN.html

⁶EP plenary debate, 12.11.20, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-11-12-ITM-002_EN.html

(that is, S&D & Renew, 15:1), it typically indicates collaboration between groups when drafting amendments.

The research material is diverse (namely oral and written) and presents multiple levels of analysis (namely committee and plenary). Deliberations occurred both at the committee level, where only a few specialized MEPs participated, and at the plenary level, where MEPs from all political groups were present. Analysing both provided a fuller account of MEPs' discursive constructions, as they offered different platforms for political groups. Whilst committee deliberations are more policy-formation oriented (Elomäki *et al.*, 2022), deliberations in the plenary are a platform to speak to the electorate, which populist groups particularly take advantage of to mark differences between groups by playing blame games and self-victimizing (Brack, 2017; Kantola and Lombardo, 2020). Analysing both levels also reveal internal tensions between and within political groups, as collaboration across groups in a committee is likelier (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustin, 2016) despite significant differences in their groups' identity (Ahrens and Kantola, 2022), more visible in plenary.

The following analysis reviews, first, the parliamentary process leading to the adoption of the Matić resolution and, second, the political groups' discursive construction of abortion rights in the EU.

IV. Parliamentary Processes Leading to the Adoption of the Matić Resolution

The Matić resolution originated from an own-initiative procedure, through which the EP asked the European Commission to introduce a legislative proposal on a specific issue – reproductive rights, in this case.

On October 27, 2020, MEP Predrag Fred Matić presented to the FEMM a 13-page draft report containing provisions for a motion for an EP resolution and an explanatory statement on the reasons and evidence for supporting this initiative. The text mentioned abortion on several occasions and specified that forcing people 'to carry their pregnancy to term against their will' is a 'violation of human rights and a form of gender-based violence' (European Parliament, 2020, p. 7).

Within the explanatory statement, the draft report explained that 41 per cent of women in the EU lived under restrictive abortion laws. Specifically, it condemned Malta for banning abortion under any circumstances and Poland for allowing it 'under very narrow circumstances with highly restrictive tendencies' (European Parliament, 2020, p. 12). A central justification for this initiative was 'the evident backlash in women's rights, with the right to a safe and legal abortion being one of the key targets in these attacks' (European Parliament, 2020, p. 12). Finally, the text pointed to remaining barriers, such as the conscientious objection that allows doctors to deny abortion, even when legal.

On 14 December 2020, the 74 MEPs in FEMM presented their amendments to the draft report. In total, 503 amendments were received and included a large set of changes: additions, reframings and deletions. This constituted a particularly large number of amendments compared to a typical FEMM report. This illustrates the salience of the issue and the contestations existing in the committee. Further analysed below, the amendments included concerns over immigration status and class inequalities (GUE-NGL & Greens/EFA), requests for concrete and direct action from the EU (S&D), the use of softer

language, such as ‘may lead’ instead of ‘lead’ and emphasis on the subsidiarity principle (EPP) and the active elimination of all references to gender equality and women’s rights, dubious scientific reasoning and emphasis on the rights of an unborn foetus (ECR, ID). Despite strong anti-gender rhetoric in the amendments of the ECR and ID groups, these did not affect the outcome, as the revised version did not include them.

On 21 May 2021, the resolution was adopted in the FEMM by 27 votes in favour (EPP, Renew, S&D, GUE-NGL, Greens/EFA), with six against (ECR, ID, EPP) and one abstention (ECR). The voting results illustrated the tensions within the EPP group, already at the committee level, as one out of the nine MEPs from the EPP in FEMM voted against the text. However, group consistency at the committee level is typically expected because committees regroup MEPs with similar interests (Elomäki *et al.*, 2022).

Following this vote, the report was put on the agenda for plenary debates and voting. Three days before the vote two alternative texts were put to vote. The first, on behalf of the ECR group (with NPDs Spain, Poland, Netherlands, Romania, Italy, Lithuania and Greece) and 12 non-attached MEPs from Hungary, insisted on Member States’ sovereignty over abortion legislation and declared that ‘the practice of abortion does not have the status of a human right ...’ (European Parliament, 2021a, p. 2). The second, on behalf of the EPP group, was initiated by MEPs Esteban Gonzales Pons and Frances Fitzgerald (European Parliament, 2021b). Compared to the Matić report, which contained 24 pages, the EPP’s alternative text contained only four pages. It noted that abortion and SRHR laws are based on national legislation and insisted on preventing abortion as it is not a form of contraception.

Compared to 2013 when the Estrela report lost to an alternative void of content text (EPP and ECR), in 2021 the EPP and ECR did not join forces to draft a common alternative text. Instead, the ECR group’s alternative text in 2021 took an openly anti-choice turn. The group moved further towards more conservative and anti-gender positions. In its two-page-long text, the ECR group did not mention women’s reproductive rights; it stressed the foetus’ right to life and conscientious objection and explicitly rejected the attribution of a human rights status to the practice of abortion.

Following the vote, the Matić report was adopted by 378 votes, with 255 votes against and 42 abstentions. Despite several attempts to reframe its content, the resolution remained largely similar in spirit to what the draft report originally mentioned. Its provisions defined safe and legal abortion care as essential services. It noted that SRHR’s opponents ‘have had a significant influence on national law and policy with retrogressive initiatives taken in several Member States’ (European Parliament, 2021c, p. 10). It urged Member States to decriminalise abortion and remove obstacles to legal abortions, such as the conscientious objection, and reaffirmed that the denial of abortion care was a form of gender-based violence. Finally, it noted that the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed the importance of recognizing abortion care as an urgent medical procedure (European Parliament, 2021c, p. 19).

Whilst the issue generated reaction throughout the parliamentary processes and across groups – either through support, amendments or drafting alternative texts – analysing the political groups’ press releases revealed that the issue was worth communicating only for some. The S&D group published a press release titled ‘European Parliament says women’s rights and SRHR are human rights and call to decriminalise abortion in all

Member States!⁷ which said that access to abortion must be a right across the EU. The Renew group published a press release titled ‘Renew Europe calls for all EU countries to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health’⁸ in which SRHR includes ‘the accessible right to abortion’. The Greens/EFA group titled its press release: ‘European Parliament needs to send a strong message to Member States that abortion rights are human rights’,⁹ leaving no doubt about abortion being a human rights issue to them. The GUE-NGL group titled its press release ‘Pandemic patriarchy – Countering the far-right’s war on women’,¹⁰ and stressed the need for EU Member States to ensure full access to safe abortion.

In contrast, the ECR group dedicated only one paragraph to the Matic resolution vote in a general week newsletter. It noted that ECR MEPs ‘do not consider abortion a human right’.¹¹ The EPP and ID groups did not communicate about it. This lack of public endorsement as a group sharply contrasts with, on the one hand, the groups’ involvement in countering the Matic resolution as part of the parliamentary processes (EPP, ECR, ID) and, on the other hand, with the involvement of individual ECR and ID MEPs in anti-gender lobbying actions, as explained below.

The Matic report, like the Van Lancker and Estrela reports, generated active lobbying against its adoption. MEP Predrag Fred Matic declared having received ‘hate mails, been compared to Hitler and had dolls of fetuses sent to his office’ by anti-gender activists (De la Baume, 2021). An online petition¹² was set up against the report with slogans such as ‘Say no to calling abortion a “human right”’ and ‘Oppose unauthorised concentration of power by the EU superstate’. The initiative was endorsed by several anti-gender campaigns, such as ‘One of us’ and ‘Pro-life action’, and seven MEPs from ID and ECR, such as Simona Baldassarre (ID), Jörg Meuthen (ID, vice-chair), Margarita de la Pisa Carrión (ECR) and Patryk Jaki (ECR).

Another example includes a YouTube video made by the anti-gender NGO European Centre for Law and Justice, which defends a right to life from conception, traditional heterosexual marriage and conscientious objection. In the video, the Matic report was described as encouraging a demographic suicide by constraining doctors to perform pregnancy termination beyond three months and until birth. Not only did the video spread misinformation about the report but it also called it a major political document that would orient the European Commission’s agenda to alarm its viewers of the necessity of opposing a dangerous text.¹³

This section showed that despite being openly against the Matic resolution during the parliamentary processes, the ECR and ID groups did not significantly affect the outcome. Whilst submitting several amendments to the draft report, the ECR’s alternative text was

⁷S&D, Press release, 24 June 2021, accessible at: <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/european-parliament-says-womens-rights-and-srhr-are-human-rights-and-calls-decriminalise>

⁸Renew, Press release, 23 June 2021, accessible at: <https://www.reneweuropengroup.eu/news/2021-06-23/renew-europe-calls-for-all-eu-countries-to-ensure-access-to-sexual-and-reproductive-health>

⁹Greens-EFA, Press release, 23 June 2021, accessible at: <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/european-parliament-needs-to-send-strong-message-to-member-states-that-abortion-rights-are-human-rights>

¹⁰The Left, Press release, 23 June 2021, accessible at: <https://left.eu/pandemic-patriarchy-countering-the-far-rights-war-on-women/>

¹¹ECR, Press release, 18 June 2021, accessible at: https://ecrgroup.eu/article/week_ahead_21_25_june_2021

¹²Petition accessible at: <https://stopmaticreport.org/>

¹³Video accessible at: <https://eclj.org/conscientious-objection/eu/parlement-europeen--lobjection-de-conscience-a-livg-en-danger>

so weak in content that it did not convince a sufficient majority. In turn, the ID group did not participate in the parliamentary process, other than via strong anti-gender vocal opposition. The inability of radical right groups to alter the content of policies in the FEMM Committee was discussed elsewhere too (Elomäki and Kantola, 2022). In contrast, the EPP tried to alter the outcome by drafting a partially different proposal, yet not as comprehensive as the Matić report. It did not convince a sufficient majority and illustrated tensions within the group. For instance, MEP Frances Fitzgerald, who contributed to the EPP alternative text, voted in favour of the Matić report.¹⁴

V. Discursive Construction of a Right to Abortion in the EU

Analysing the parliamentary processes demonstrated the differentiated involvement of political groups in the parliamentary work surrounding the Matić resolution. The following section analyses the different discursive constructions of a right to abortion in the EU by political groups. It also pays attention to the different meanings attributed to EU values during abortion debates. Finally, it discusses the impact of these on gender equality policymaking in the EP.

Debating the Content of the Right

A dominant discursive construction of abortion rights at the EU level was to frame it as a human right and a precondition for gender equality. It referred to the values enshrined in the Treaty of the EU, Article 2. This strategy was typically used by the groups S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and GUE-NGL – that is, the more progressive branch in the EP. These groups are known for sustaining an ‘identity narrative’ (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021, p. 9), where rights are constructed as universal. Regarding abortion rights, these groups systematically claimed during debates that women’s rights are human rights. More specifically, MEP Sylwia Spurek said the ‘right to abortion is a human right’ (Greens/EFA, 2:25), and MEP Fred Predrag Matić said reproductive rights were ‘indivisible’ human rights (S&D, 13:1). Simultaneously, abortion was perceived as ‘a precondition for equality’ (Karen Melchior Renew, 2:51) and Member States could not be ‘forcing women to return to more reproductive tasks’ (Ernest Urtasun Greens/EFA, 7:6).

Such framings strategically aligned respect for abortion rights with EU values of respect for human rights and equality between women and men. By comparing the EU’s gender equality project and backlashes in Member States, it stressed a situation of crisis in which attacks on abortion were regarded as inconsistent with EU values. In contrast, the EPP group that is known for sustaining status quo regarding human rights (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021), did not talk of abortion as a human right and bent the issue towards subsidiarity arguments. With the exception of Sirpa Pietikäinen, a Finnish MEP known for being amongst the progressive in EPP, whom framed women’s self-determination as ‘a crucial and indisputable element of a human right’ (EPP, 2:70).

In sharp contradiction, anti-gender groups known as ‘reframers’ (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021) strongly opposed the above constructions by problematizing a competition of rights with anti-gender arguments. Here, the radical-right populist and Eurosceptic groups ECR and

¹⁴VoteWatch (2021) FEMM resolution (as whole). Accessible at: <https://www.votewatch.eu/en/term9-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-in-the-eu-in-the-frame-of-women-s-health-motion-for-resolu-78.html>

ID stood out. They actively reframed human rights by emphasizing the EU value of human dignity in which a right for unborn life prevailed. For instance, some suggested that as a precondition for all rights, the right to life is ‘the most important value’ (Baeta Mazurek ECR, 2:61). They problematized a competition of rights between a pregnant person and an unborn foetus via ‘political genderphobia’ (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021, p. 16) and secular human rights language. They referred to fetuses as ‘defenceless’ (ECR, 2:61; ECR, 3:47), ‘children’ (ECR, 26:18) or ‘babies’ (ECR, 12:16) and invoked the United Nation (UN) Convention on the Right of the Child. They spoke about abortion as ‘inhumane’ (ECR, 15:3), a ‘torture for both child and mother’ (ECR, 14:11) and invoked the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (for example against torture).

Silencing gender and women’s rights are common strategies for anti-gender actors, as they prefer to talk about individual mothers and children rather than about structural gendered inequalities. The ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric was also visible during debates where MEPs supporting reproductive rights were called ‘gender-sensitive colleagues’ who should ‘take care of the 99% of women who know exactly when they get up in the morning that they are a woman’ instead of ‘messing with the Creator’ (ID, 7:3). This citation shows that transphobia prevailed in the discourse of ‘reframers’ groups (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). It constitutes direct opposition to gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020). This strategy silenced the EU values of respect for human rights and equality between men and women to the advantage of a reframed EU value of human dignity in which the right to life of the unborn prevails.

Debating the Supranational Aspect of the Right

Another dominant construction for defending a right to abortion in the EU was to construct it in connection with the EU values of democracy and respect for the rule of law. This rhetoric was particularly visible when debating the Polish bill restricting abortion, passed under circumstances that raised concerns about the judiciary’s independence. Some groups framed it as violating the rule of law. Since EU Treaties provide legal measures against a Member State accused of violating the rule of law, such framing opened a discursive route for sanctioning restrictions on abortion when such restrictions resulted from nondemocratic processes.

This discursive construction travelled in the EP at multiple levels. For instance, one joint meeting between the FEMM and the committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) on ‘attacks on abortion rights and breaches of the rule of law in Poland’ precisely discussed the democratic facets of a Member State restricting abortion rights. Another example included the joint meeting between the FEMM and the Special Committee on Foreign Interferences in all Democratic Processes in the EU (INGE) on ‘Foreign interference on the financing of anti-choice organisations in the EU’ during when undemocratic interference against reproductive rights in the EU were debated. Here, MEPs framed restrictions on abortion rights as a risk to democracy. For instance, MEP Raphaël Glucksmann stated that ‘some foreign powers use social questions, such as the question on abortion (...) to impose their ideologies and polarise our societies to a boiling point that threatens the stability of our democracies’ (S&D 12:2). It highlighted a crisis in which backlashes on abortion rights constitute an attack on the entire democratic bloc of the EU. Regarding the Matic resolution’s adoption, these debates framed abortion rights

within broader democratic concerns and created the need to preserve the democratic unity of the bloc.

This construction marked boundaries within the EU between ‘others’ as backward and ‘self’ as progressive. Backlashes on abortion rights were systematically constructed as symptomatic to far-right governments. Even if direct or indirect barriers to abortion rights exist in most Member States, debates have mostly centred on some. For instance, MEP Nikolaj Villumsen and MEP Maljin Bjork pointed to the ‘*Right-Wing* Polish government’ (GUE-NGL, 3:52, emphasis added) and ‘the conservative *right-wing* in Poland and across Europe’ (GUE-NGL, 2:65, emphasis added). Attacks on abortion rights were constructed as alien to the EU, strange to its values. However, most indirect barriers to abortion in the EU were overlooked. Similarly, describing a contamination effect, MEP Eugenia Rodríguez Palop claimed that ‘after Poland, the *extreme right* will go for each one of us’ (GUE-NGL, 2:34, emphasis added). This citation also draws attention to a situation of crisis in which unity is imperative to prevent escalation. In opposition to this alien ‘virus’, the EU and its values were defined as the cure. MEP Sylwia Spurek said:

In Poland, there is no longer any rule of law and human rights (...) You can temporarily take our rights (...) but you will not take our voice away because we are in the European Union. (Greens/EFA, 2:24)

This binary construction – modern EU versus alien backwardness – polarizes Member States along the lines of different values whilst reproducing the idea that the EU is a protector of human rights. For instance, MEP Juan Agilar suggested that, in the past, the EU had a ‘democratising’ effect on candidate countries ‘that aspired to accession [and] modernised their legal systems to absorb common values of equality and rights and freedoms of all’ (S&D, 3:104). Within this understanding, some political groups were typical examples of democratic ideals and others were ‘permanently in transition’ and ‘in need of catching up’ (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). This rhetoric was used by several political groups, including those standing on opposite sides, such as the EPP and GUE/NGL. Whilst it helped find unity behind the adoption of the Matić resolution, it also created and strengthened geopolitical divisions between Member States.

Further, another dominant strategy to oppose abortion rights at the supranational level was to invoke the subsidiarity principle. This strategy is regarded as indirect opposition to gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020). It is typically used by Eurosceptic and anti-gender groups seeking to undermine the EU’s gender equality policies. It is also used by groups ‘sitting on the fence’ (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021), like the EPP. This strategy opposes the right by stating that it clashes with the EU competence.

Regarding EU values, this strategy problematizes the values of democracy and respect for the rule of law differently from those seen above. Here, MEPs understand the value of democracy and respect for the rule of law as having the meaning that the EP must adhere to its competence. Thus, to discuss abortion rights oversteps EP’s competence. For example, during the two plenary debates dealing with abortion rights in Poland, MEPs from ECR and ID would typically say that ‘Poland is sovereign on issues discussed today’ (ECR 2: 108) and ‘the EU has no competence’ on ‘the abortion law of the sovereign state of Poland’ (ID 3:42). In amendments, the legal grounds were replaced by those defining the scope of the EU’s competence and subsidiarity principle. In comparison, whilst the EPP group is not a Eurosceptic group, it also supported a subsidiarity approach. For

example, its alternative text stressed national sovereignty and subsidiarity principle. This discursive construction denies legitimacy to the EP when discussing abortion and delineates what can be achieved in policymaking.

One counter-discourse was to ground legitimacy within a dynamic understanding of EU values, such as respect for human rights. For instance, MEP Fred Predrag Matić asked, ‘What binds and unites us, if not preserving and respecting basic human rights?’ (S&D 3:62). Other MEPs from the S&D group claimed that the EP ‘cannot hide behind the sovereignty of Member States’ because ‘human rights are supranational’ (S&D 13:1). MEPs from GUE-NGL and Greens/EFA groups concurred and added that despite the allocation of competencies, ‘no Member States can (...) violate human rights’ (GUE, 3:28). In turn, MEP Sylwia Spurek, one of the strongest voices in the defence of abortion rights, called for treaty reform ‘because every area of women’s human rights, including the right to abortion, must be a competence of the Union’ (Greens/EFA 7:26). This citation illustrates how, despite struggles over competencies, some MEPs requested concrete actions from the EU. Where the discursive construction of the subsidiarity principle limits what the EP can achieve as a democratic actor, a dynamic and progressive interpretation of EU values expands the possibilities for greater integration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article contributed to scholarly debates on the different meanings attributed to EU values by analysing the discursive constructions of political groups in the EP when debating a right to abortion in the EU. The findings offered insight into how the ambiguity of EU values meant that they can be reframed, even if only temporarily and symbolically, in line with respect for abortion rights. The analysis answered the research questions by showing the ways in which a right to abortion in the EU was constructed by the groups; their strategic use of EU values to justify their position; and the impact on gender equality policymaking in the EU.

First, the analysis showed that the groups S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and GUE-NGL constructed a right to abortion in the EU as a matter of human right and precondition to gender equality. To do so, they interpreted EU values in the sense that respect for abortion right aligned with values of human rights, equality between women and men, democracy, and respect for the rule of law. This construction stressed a situation of crisis when abortion rights are under attack in the EU. In other words, the whole EU’s democratic bloc is threatened when abortion rights are restricted. The impact of these constructions on gender equality policymaking in the EP was that consensus around protecting safe and legal access to abortion rights was reached at the cost of constructing some Member States as alien to EU values and sole responsible for undermining abortion rights in the EU.

Second, the analysis showed that the groups ECR and ID constructed the issue in terms of competing rights, where the right of the unborn life prevailed. In this construction, EU values were interpreted as protecting human dignity as well as strict boundaries between Member States and EU competences. Values of democracy and respect for the rule of law were seen by those groups as enforcing the subsidiarity principle. The impact on gender equality policymaking was thus to silence gender equality and women’s rights in abortion debates.

The article has shown that gender equality policymaking, via abortion debates, becomes a site where boundaries are marked between other as ‘backwards’ and self as ‘progressive’. It also constitutes a site where one’s political group identity is marked vis-à-vis others.

Finally, the analysis showed that the EPP group did not actively engage in abortion debates, to the exception of few MEPs. Rather, a strong emphasis was put on the subsidiarity principle. As the biggest group in the EP, the group’s use of subsidiarity argument limits what can be achieved as part of gender equality policymaking in the EP. The argument is also difficult to dispute since it allows the existence of a supranational polity, in the first place. Finally, it plays in favour of anti-gender groups by preventing binding measures for protecting rights.

Overall, a key contribution of the article was to demonstrate that *attacks* on abortion rights in the EU were increasingly constructed as *alien* to EU values despite strategic efforts by opponents to reframe the content of such values in conservative terms. The strategic choice of some groups to construct a divide between ‘progressive self’ and ‘backward others’ has been described beyond the issue of abortion, such as human right (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). It shows that few are targeted as problematic, while overlooking the many indirect barriers to abortion right in the EU. It also reaffirms the EP self-constructed image of progressive supporter of equality rights (van der Vleuten, 2019).

Nonetheless, another important contribution was to show that despite growing opposition to gender equality, characterized in particular by direct and indirect strategies both in discourse and in practice, the adoption of the Matić resolution illustrated how a progressive discourse on abortion rights still had validity in the EP. It found that whilst resistance and attempts at reframing the issue were intense during parliamentary processes, this did not seriously affect the policy outcome. In contrast, the discursive construction that sought to align respect for abortion rights with the EU values of equality, human rights and democracy succeeded in creating an imperative for solidarity against undemocratic processes. Thus, respect for abortion rights was regarded as a marker of the EU bloc, even if only symbolically. It marked boundaries with ‘others’ in the EU – defined as far-right extremist governments – and seemed to facilitate unity among some political groups during a crisis defined by Eurosceptic and nationalist movements.

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Correspondence: Valentine Berthet, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, FI-33014 Tampere, Finland.
email: valentine.berthet@tuni.fi

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III

Gender, violence, and political institutions: struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament

Valentine Berthet and Johanna Kantola

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Gender, Violence, and Political Institutions: Struggles over Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament

Valentine Berthet and Johanna Kantola  *

The global #MeToo movement exposed the prevalence of sexual harassment across countries, in diverse contexts, and within institutions; including the supposedly gender-friendly European Parliament (EP). Using a unique set of interview data with key actors in the #MeTooEP campaign and Members of European Parliament and staff, this article analyzes the discursive struggles around sexual harassment in the EP. The analysis shows how these discourses fundamentally shaped the patchy institutional response to sexual harassment with findings that illuminate the resistance to institutional change.

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is often presented as the most gender-equal institution of the EU decision-making bodies. Women's representation increased from 36.4 percent to 40.4 percent in the elections of 2019 and the EP is widely regarded as the guarantor of gender-friendly policies. Recent research has begun to differentiate this gender-friendly image with a focus on the less apparent political dynamics and gendered power struggles behind the scenes. Such struggles relate to the substantial differences in the gender politics of the political groups of the EP (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustin 2016; Luhiste and Kenny 2016). This extant research reveals how unequal gendered practices persist and how women and men Members of European Parliament (MEPs) are differently positioned when carrying out their representative work. At the same time, the EP remains a very white institution, with few black, Asian, and minority ethnic MEPs and staff, for whom working in the EP is a very racialized experience.

This article contributes to these debates by analyzing one specific aspect of the gendered dynamics, practices, and persisting inequalities in the EP, namely

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland.

*johanna.kantola@tuni.fi

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sexual harassment. The prevalence of sexual harassment in any institution powerfully illustrates how gender shapes the political work and inner life of a political institution. Feminist scholars have long argued that all forms of misogyny, including gendered violence in the form of sexual harassment, is a signal to women of their place in society (Manne 2017). Like any form of gendered violence, it restricts women's representative work by suggesting that their role is not equal to that of men (Krook 2020).

Sexual harassment as a policy issue is not new in the EP, which has a long history of legislating on sexual harassment in workplaces (Zippel 2004, 2006, 2008). Nevertheless, it took the international #MeToo campaign against sexual harassment (2017–) to draw public attention to how widespread sexual harassment was within political institutions. We suggest that the EP became a particularly interesting case for two reasons. First, European media soon began to cover stories about incidents in the parliament and the failure of the official procedures to protect the victims and punish perpetrators. Sexual harassment was clearly prevalent in this supposedly gender-equal institution. Second, and simultaneously, a group of EP workers started the #MeTooEP campaign for visibility and institutional change. Led by parliamentary assistants (Accredited Personal Assistants (APAs) working with MEPs), #MeTooEP acted in close interaction with the formal and informal institutions of the EP.

The research objective of the article is to provide an analysis of the ways in which the key actors in the EP—staff, MEPs, political groups, institutional representatives—constructed sexual harassment in the parliament and how these constructions powerfully shaped the solutions put forward. This makes it possible to understand the potential for and resistance to tackling sexual harassment in the parliament. We contend that feminist institutional analysis combined with discourse analysis provides the most effective conceptual and analytical tools for this endeavor (see Erikson 2019). Theoretically, the article's contribution is to further understandings of the ways in which formal and informal institutions are shaped by discourses, namely by exploring the effects that discourses have on institutional arrangements against sexual harassment in the parliament. In other words, discourses produce effects (Foucault 1980); they can disrupt institutional arrangements seen as normal and “natural”, and enter in struggle with opposing discourses, which in turn act to preserve the integrity of the institutions. Discourses, then, can powerfully maintain and legitimize formal and informal institutions, or can contest and initiate institutional change. These objectives underpin our research questions, which are: first, how is sexual harassment discursively constructed as a problem in the EP by different actors? Second, how do those constructions shape the solutions that are put forward by parliamentary actors? Third, what are the effects of these discourses for institutional change in the parliament?

Our research material consists of first, fifty-one interviews with MEPs and staff conducted in the EP in Brussels between 2018 and 2019, the height of #MeTooEP activities. Second, we draw upon official documents of the EP

(such as parliamentary Rules of Procedure) and plenary debates on sexual harassment to analyze publicly available means of debating the issue. We analyze this combined data with insights from feminist discourse analysis and feminist institutionalism to provide a more nuanced understanding of our research questions.

The findings demonstrate the discursive struggles over sexual harassment in the EP and the resistances and opportunities which emerged for progressive institutional change. Some pro-equality MEPs and staff were willing not only to talk about sexual harassment as an abuse of gendered power in the parliament, but also to enact new rules which carved space for progressive institutional change. In contrast, some MEPs and staff resisted this, framing sexual harassment as a cultural or individual problem, which required first and foremost changing individual attitudes and behavior, rather than reforming institutions. Some conservative MEPs articulated a discourse that constructed the EP as a good institution, deeming the existing institutional practices good enough to tackle sexual harassment. In response, #MeTooEP adopted a combative tone, with a discourse asserting that victims of sexual harassment were harassed workers. The campaign was hugely successful in influencing public debate on sexual harassment in the EU. Our analysis, however, explains why its success in transforming EP institutions was at best partial.

Studying Sexual Harassment in Politics

The European Union has had, since 2002, a Directive on Equal Treatment that enforces equal working conditions between women and men and defines sexual harassment as sex discrimination and a violation of dignity (Zippel 2006, 2008). Because this Directive is legally binding, Member States had to comply and modify their national legal frameworks. Considering that the EU had no competence over “violence against women” as a policy field, many scholars saw this Directive as one of European feminists’ major achievements (Kantola 2010; Zippel 2008).

Zippel provides a detailed analysis of the discursive struggles at the EU level. She argues that the adoption of the Directive was possible only because advocates for an EU-wide intervention against sexual harassment framed it strategically as a *workplace issue* (Zippel 2008). The opponents framed sexual harassment as a *cultural issue* that should be left to Member States. They argued that the vast cultural diversity within the EU hindered common agreement on what constitutes sexual harassment (Zippel 2008, 67). Feminist discourses, in contrast, framed sexual harassment as a *male abuse of power* over women—violence against women—the scope of which would then fall outside EU competences (Zippel 2008, 67). Advocates for an EU-wide intervention, in turn, used the 1976 Equal Treatment Directive, which provided equal treatment for men and women in employment, including working

conditions, as a legal basis to extend the scope of the protection to the prohibition of sexual harassment (Zippel 2008). By framing it as a *workplace issue* and by using EU's authority in economic integration, advocates obtained the amendment of the 1976 Directive into the 2002 Directive, which now includes a provision against sexual harassment at the workplace (Kantola 2010; Zippel 2008).

However, Zippel saw the unsolved problem of cultural diversity as one of the limitations of the Directive. She argued that the freedom of movement for workers across Member States—one EU *acquis*—required a set of standards on what constitutes sexual harassment despite cultural differences. In particular, she asked “whose cultural standards are supposed to be applied when employees from different countries work together . . . ?” (2008, 67). We contend that those concerns remain pertinent today, especially within the EP where EU cultural diversity is quintessential. A further shortcoming was that the Directive's scope was limited to sexual harassment *in* the workplace (Kantola 2010, 114) without considering spaces beyond the workplace, such as online harassment, or particular site of workplaces, such as parliaments.

In 2017, the #MeToo campaign triggered new debates about studying parliaments as particular workplaces (Erikson and Josefsson 2019) where sexual harassment occurs (Collier and Raney 2018a, 2018b; Krook 2018). In the United Kingdom, the reinvigorated debate prompted the resignation of several Cabinet ministers and MPs (Krook 2018, 67). Sexual harassment *in politics* was shown to be facilitated by the parliamentary environment that encouraged, for instance, a “particular employment set-up” making staff vulnerable to harassment from MPs (Krook 2018, 68–69). In Canada, a code of conduct between MPs against sexual harassment from 2015 pre-dated the #MeToo campaign. However, by leaving some of the institutional norms untouched—such as party discipline and an adversarial style of politics—the code merely constituted a new institutional rule “nested” inside old ones, reinforcing and permitting patriarchal norms “under the guise of change” (Collier and Raney 2018b, 796). This shows the limitations of “layering” new institutional practices when structural reforms were needed (Waylen 2014).

These discussions are part of broader debates on violence against women in politics (VAWP), which includes research on violence during elections (Bjarnegård 2018) and in Latin America (Biroli 2018; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016a, 2016b; Piscopo 2016; Restrepo Sanín 2018). In a recent report, the Inter-Parliamentary Union also highlighted the risk for democracy and extended the impact of sexism, harassment, and violence against women in parliaments to parliamentary staff (2018).

Drawing on this extant research, we adopt an approach of discerning the discourses of sexual harassment in the EP and analyzing them in relation to institutional change. Looking at the discourses *inside* the EP allows us to contribute to this previous research on VAWP and sexual harassment, and to better understand the power struggles behind institutional changes.

The EP as a Site of Political Representation and a Workplace

As noted by the research on VAWP, institutional rules and norms shape its prevalence in political institutions. In the case of sexual harassment in parliaments, these include in the first instance parliamentary rules of procedure. The political work of the EP is guided by its Rules of Procedure, which have been frequently modified to ensure effective working of the parliament. In 2006 and 2017, reforms to the Rules of Procedure introduced new penalties for MEPs and staff engaging in inappropriate behavior, including Rule 11 which bans defamatory, racist, and xenophobic language or behavior. However, penalties were controversial and rarely applied (Brack 2017). Moreover, these reforms did not specifically address sexual harassment, and the issue, as well as the procedures related to it, remained undefined.

Remedies for instances of sexual harassment have proven to be problematic for those working as representatives in politics. Over time, legal developments in this area have mostly focused on traditional workplaces, excluding other settings, such as political institutions or virtual spaces (Franks 2012, 655). Indeed, political institutions are not “normal” workplaces, and elected representatives are not working under “normal” conditions. One example of this is parliamentary immunity and privilege (Corbett, Jacobs, and Neville 2016, 76). The EP is home to MEPs from many different Member States, each of which have their own legal systems that enforce different levels of immunity. Thus, as MEPs they share political space in one parliament, while having very different experiences, perceptions, and expectations of parliamentary immunity.

Like all parliaments, the EP employs a wide range of staff for its administration, maintenance, and catering. Staff hired by the parliament, or by political groups, have different employment conditions than parliamentary assistants hired by MEPs. Although employed in the parliament, all are differently positioned in terms of their tasks, roles, and contracts. *Vis-à-vis* sexual harassment, these differentiated terms of employment result in quite different vulnerabilities: MEPs rely on APAs on the basis of a mutual trust; if that trust is broken, APAs’ employment can be terminated before their contracts end (Pegan 2017). Most MEPs have two or three APAs working in their personal offices, often in close contact, and many will travel with them between the parliamentary locations of Brussels and Strasbourg.

We suggest that this circumstantial diversity raises particular questions in relation to understanding sexual harassment in the EP. While the proximity of APAs to their MEPs may increase the risk of sexual harassment, any attempt to resist or report misbehavior may lead to the APA losing their MEP’s trust. Some issues are common to all parliaments: established institutional culture, norms, and practices that maintain strong power hierarchies between staff and MEPs, as well as a culture of silence, deemed necessary to protect the institution’s credibility. Issues specific to the EP, include the fact that MEPs

and staff come from different political cultures and that twenty-four languages are officially used. During the 8th legislature (2014–2019), they sat in eight political groups ranging from the traditional well-established groups of EPP, S&D, and ALDE to the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL, and finally to the more volatile and more recent (radical) right populist groups of ECR, EFDD, and ENF. There were also non-attached MEPs (NIs). Despite this diversity they come together to create a “bubble” (Busby 2013), where the above-mentioned mixture of national political norms and practices meet a well-established political and institutional culture. Despite this diversity, the EP hosts very few black and minority ethnic MEPs or staff. Rather, there have been outspoken nazi (Greek Golden Dawn), and several Eurosceptic parties and MEPs, seeking to undermine the EU from within.

Interestingly, the EP had institutional mechanisms for tackling sexual harassment from within but these were largely dormant. Since 2014, the Anti-Harassment Committee of the EP, despite having jurisdiction over both psychological and sexual harassment, and being responsible for complaints against MEPs, had not investigated a single case of sexual harassment prior to 2019. Both MEPs and staff were represented on the Committee and a gender balance is respected; there was, however, no indication that members were trained to review sensitive cases. The Committee reported to the EP President, who took the final decision (Bureau decision 2018: article 11).

In this context, the international #MeToo campaign gave a real boost to debating sexual harassment in the EP. As in other parliaments, incidents of sexual harassment did not suddenly appear in the EP with the #MeToo campaign in 2017 (Krook 2018). Instead, attempts to tackle them preceded the campaign. Staff members had already used internal mechanisms to complain against abuse but the “culture of silence” left them with no remedies (see *Politico* 2017). The campaign was important in exposing the extent of the problem within the parliament, the shortcomings of existing mechanisms, the political contestations, and it encouraged staff to mobilize.

It made its way in the EP, first, by surfacing in October 2017 during a plenary debate about the adoption of a resolution combating sexual harassment and abuse in the EU (hereinafter “the Resolution”) where MEPs shared their own experiences. Second, it involved the parliament when MEP Édouard Martin told a French radio that his parliamentary assistant had kept in a notebook testimonies of sexual harassment since 2014 (see *Euractiv* 2017). The notebook then became highly visible in French and European media and the public attention encouraged the parliamentary assistant to co-found #MeTooEP. The staff-led #MeTooEP campaign started in March 2018 and consisted of mainly APAs, trainees, political advisors, and other staff members across the political spectrum. Their first action was to collect 1,000 signatures on a petition directing attention toward the issue internally. It requested three changes: (i) changing the composition of the Anti-Harassment Committee, (ii) an external audit of independent experts to review the Anti-Harassment

Committee's work, and (iii) mandatory training for MEPs and group leaders on sexual harassment.

By launching a blog—a digital version of the notebook—#MeTooEP received a lot of publicity in European and national media. Similarly, they successfully highlighted sexual harassment as a relevant political issue during the 2019 election. By asking candidates to sign a pledge to “show their commitment” to efforts outlawing sexual abuse, they made candidates symbolically committed and accountable—notably both the EP President and the Anti-Harassment Committee President signed it.

Toward a Discursive Approach to Studying Gender Violence in Politics

To investigate the political struggles around sexual harassment in the EP and how they shaped the gendered institutions of the parliament this article draws theoretically and methodologically on feminist institutional (FI) analysis and combines it with discourse analysis. The article develops a framework with which to analyze how different actors constructed sexual harassment in relation to the EP, and how their constructions shaped parliamentary institutions in gendered ways. In so doing, we theoretically contribute to FI analysis by pinpointing the role of discursive struggles (about what sexual harassment may be) that powerfully shape how the problems would best be tackled in political institutions (see also Erikson 2019).

The contributions made by FI scholarship have provided significant analytical insights to explain the gendered foundations of political institutions, the gendered mechanisms of continuity and change, and the impact of gendered actors (Kenny 2007; Krook and Mackay 2011–2015; Waylen 2017). One of the key insights we draw upon is the distinction between formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions can be defined as codified rules. Informal institutions, in turn, signify customary elements, traditions, moral values, religious beliefs, and norms of behavior (Chappell and Waylen 2013, 604). Thereby informal institutions too can be recognized by the fact that not following them may involve sanctions—and conversely conforming to them offers rewards (Erikson 2019, 26). The interplay between formal rule changes—such as the adoption of gender quotas—and “hidden” informal institutions is complex and the latter may interact with formal rules to block, reverse, or support progressive gender reform (Mackay 2014; Waylen 2014, 2017).

Understanding the dynamics behind progressive change toward more gender-equal institutions or blocking and slowing it down is at the core of FI concerns. Institutional change can be studied with the help of four concepts: (i) *displacement* where new institutions are created to replace old rules in a process of norm competition; (ii) *layering* where new rules are introduced on top

of existing ones; (iii) *drift* where the impact of existing rules change because of changes in the environment and institutions come to have a new meaning, and (iv) *conversion*, where actors work with the system and utilize any ambiguity within existing rules to make institutions behave differently (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, 101–2; Waylen 2014, 219–20).

Ideas and discourses occupy a central place in the process of institutional change and there are a variety of approaches to studying the relationship between ideas, discourses, and institutions (see Erikson 2019, 26–27). We study institutions from a Foucauldian perspective which begins with understanding power as omnipresent in all social relations; its exercise thus ensures that every aspect of the social world is political (Foucault 1972, 1980), and all institutions are embedded in discursive contexts. Discourses, then, always matter in relation to institutions. This calls for an understanding of institutions not as something fixed and given, but rather as fluid phenomena that are in constant need of reproduction (Bacchi and Rönnblom 2014). This article thus employs a synthesis of Foucauldian discourse analysis with more recent FI analysis (see also Kantola 2019) that critically scrutinizes which institutional solutions certain discourses about sexual harassment entailed.

In terms of method of analysis, we discern, first, key discourses and ask who articulates them. Questions of power and resistance are relevant to the method as are struggles and contradictions (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). The analysis shows the differences within the EP, its political groups and MEPs, and challenges the impression of the institution as a unified, gender-friendly actor. Second, we analyze the institutional solutions that discourses entail. This is one of our key contributions. Analyzing discourses and institutions helps to illuminate the difficulties of institutional change as institutions are always embedded in broader discursive contexts. This can be seen in the solutions put forward and whether they are actually enacted upon—an issue posed by our third research question. The research interest, then, is not to study the strategic framing of the issue and the way that different discourses are used strategically.

Our research material was gathered in the EP in Brussels in 2018–2019 and consists of fifty-one interviews with women and men MEPs and members of staff. It is drawn from a larger study focusing on gendered practices and policies of the EP's political groups. First, we analyze the general interviews which explore MEP and staff experiences and perceptions of the gendered practices, including explicit questions about sexual harassment. The interviewees came from all EP's political groups and represented a full gender balance. We have selected to analyze only those parts that deal explicitly with sexual harassment. Second, we have analyzed four interviews with key MEPs and staff focusing solely on the issue of sexual harassment in the EP. Third, we analyzed the publicly available documents about sexual harassment in the EP, including parliament's plenary debates on Resolution 2017/2897; Rules of procedures revision 2018/2170 (Corbett); EP measures during 2018 on ending sexual harassment

and violence against women in public spaces; the 2018 Ombudsman’s report on sexual harassment; and the press release entitled “MEPs propose measures to combat mobbing and sexual harassment.” Finally, we also used #MeTooEP blog, press conferences, and events that were recorded.

Constructing Sexual Harassment as an Issue in the EP

This section focuses on discourses about sexual harassment in the EP and how they imply particular institutional solutions. We group discourses in four: (i) *abuse of gendered power*, (ii) *private or cultural issue*, (iii) *good institution*, and (iv) *harassed workers*. Entailed in them are four different institutional solutions which we discuss in relation to each. Framing sexual harassment as an *abuse of gendered power* calls for creating new rules and practices. Constructing it as a *private or cultural issue* prioritizes changing attitudes instead of institutions. The *good institution* discourse prefers using existing institutions to tackle sexual harassment. Finally, the *harassed workers* discourse suggests transforming both formal and informal institutions. We apply feminist institutionalism to explain what is at stake in each (Lowndes 2019; Waylen 2014).

Table 1 presents an overview of the findings on discourses; proposed solutions; institutional changes entailed; and who represents them. Whilst the discourses are articulated by different actors, distinctions between them are analytical: individual actors may articulate different and multiple discourses.

Table 1. Discourses and solutions on tackling sexual harassment in the European Parliament

Discourse about sexual harassment	Proposed solutions	Institutional change	Represented by
<i>Abuse of gendered power</i>	New rules	Institutional layering	Pro-gender-equality MEPs in the EP
<i>Private or cultural problem</i>	Attitude change	Changing individuals instead of institutions	MEPs across the political spectrum
<i>Good institution</i>	Using existing internal mechanisms	Preserving institutions	MEPs in key positions of power, especially from the EPP
<i>Harassed workers</i>	Transforming both formal and informal institutions	Institutional displacement	#MeTooEP

Some are clearly more compatible (*abuse of gendered power* and *harassed workers* discourses, or *private or cultural issue* and *good institution* discourses), whilst others would be incompatible (*abuse of gendered power* and *private or cultural issue*). These findings are discussed one by one in the empirical analysis sections below.

Abuse of Gendered Power

A defining feature of feminist scholarship and activism in the field of violence against women in society and politics is to articulate such manifestations as abuses of gendered power (e.g. Zippel 2008, 67). In relation to sexual harassment, discourse of *abuse of gendered power* explains why sexual harassment takes place in politics and society. In the EP plenary debate on the Resolution, there were various manifestations of this discourse.

All MEPs from the biggest and most traditional political groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE) and the pro-equality groups (Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL) who spoke in the debate constructed the issue in a similar way, highlighting the gendered power imbalance that sexual harassment is based on. For instance, Malin Björk (GUE/NGL) emphasized that sexual harassment was not a cultural or regional problem, but a structural one. MEPs on the political left, such as Wajid Khan (S&D), often emphasized that “sexual harassment knows no class or culture and is not confined to the home or the workplace”. Both Björk (GUE/NGL) and Terry Reintke (Greens/EFA) also invited men to participate in combating sexual harassment. A number of MEPs sitting in the plenary revealed their own experiences and displayed signs with “#MeToo” inscriptions in their respective languages, such as #moiaussi and #yotambien.

Many MEPs who spoke in the debate were arguably the “usual suspects” in the EP. They had long track records of working for gender equality, many of whom sat in the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM). Notably, the plenary debate was an occasion to endorse a political role by defining sexual harassment as a form of gendered abuse of power rooted in society as a whole, instead of challenging the institutions of the EP—which may not directly speak to the concerns of the electorate. It was noted that among the forty speakers during the debate, only five were men. In contrast, some MEPs (Skripek ECR, Troszczynski ENF) seized the opportunity to voice their opposition to or lack of interest in the issue, indicating that despite the general outrage and empathy with the victims, the issue was not a primary concern for all. It also illustrated the limits to what can be achieved by MEPs debating the issue in a plenary session.

In sharp contrast to the plenary debate, our interview material shows that perception of sexual harassment among MEPs is far more complex. Power of certain discourses evoked resistance. For instance, some MEPs resisted change, often by expressing it through anger and exaggeration. One male MEP from

right populist EFDD suggested that #MeToo had made his work impossible, that it was a “nonsense” with which he “disagreed profoundly”:

It’s one of the reasons why I’m very reluctant to hire people . . . if you can’t keep your hands off the office staff then obviously you’ve got a problem. But I mean, I don’t know what you do to cure that apart from having people turn into eunuchs. (EFDD MEP 7:40)

Another MEP suggested the debate had gone too far and claimed that “people are almost now frightened to say hello to a member of the opposite sex or be sat in a room alone with them” (EFDD MEP 6:61). In our fieldnotes supplementing the interviews, we noted how one MEP claimed nowadays one “cannot touch a sleeve without it being sexual harassment” (ENF Shadowing notes). In sum, while EP plenary speeches seem to point to a visible consensus among some MEPs, our interview material shows various forms of resistance to the seriousness of sexual harassment in the EP. This became even more apparent in what followed.

MEPs who articulated discourse about sexual harassment as a gendered abuse of power in the plenary often expressed openness toward creating new rules and practices. For instance, in the Resolution’s plenary debate, Reintke (Greens/EFA) called for an EU directive on violence against women, and for specific measures in parliament to tackle sexual harassment. Bearder (ALDE) called for MEPs’ mandatory training and more robust guarantees that those reporting sexual harassment will not lose their jobs. This openness to formal institutional change also explains #MeTooEP campaign’s partial success and why some practices were changed.

Sexual Harassment as a Private or Cultural Problem

Our interview data illustrate two ways to construct sexual harassment, both of which directly opposed the idea that it was a manifestation of an abuse of gendered power: sexual harassment, first, as a private problem, and second, as a cultural problem. The two are distinct from one another but a key element in both is countering the idea that sexual harassment would be a matter of structural gender inequalities. The significance of discourse when debating European sexual harassment policies has long roots, as shown by Zippel (2008) and discussed above.

An MEP from ALDE suggested that sexual harassment “has to be managed in privacy It’s good for the people who has been harassed, and also I think it’s good for that who has done it.” She also said she did not “always understand that people first go to public” (ALDE MEP 1:67). Another, from ECR, described how she has provided help to members of staff on an individual basis “trying to stop certain behaviors happening” (ECR MEP 2:15). Both

citations point to a desire to solve the issue at individual rather than institutional level.

Some MEPs we interviewed revealed personal experiences of being sexually harassed while working as MEPs, but outside the parliamentary context. One reflected on how she stayed silent, despite her relatively powerful position, and expressed her understanding of difficulties faced by staff members in speaking out (S&D MEP 12:17). Another MEP told us about his awareness of a case of sexual harassment between two gay men, and how both still worked at the EP because the harassed “isn’t willing to report” (EFDD MEP 48:24). These examples seem to confirm the strong legacy of treating such incidents of violence as a private issue.

Even more common among MEPs was to frame sexual harassment in terms of cultural differences arising from the diversity in the parliament. In the same way, this discourse steered responsibility away from the EP, toward “other cultures” as opposed to “ours.” For instance, MEP Wiśniewska (ECR) said during a plenary debate about gender mainstreaming in the EP: “cultural, educated people do not do such things,” whilst another told us that: “There are big cultural differences across the EP, what is acceptable in certain member states to be said and done is not acceptable in others” (ECR MEP 2:11). Similarly, a member of staff said: “and I don’t blame, any kind of nationality for it but there is a certain moment that cultures are so different” (ALDE Staff 18:43). Both citations indicate how the EP’s cultural diversity is often uncritically used as a justification for its slow and weak response to sexual harassment. The effect of both discourses is that responsibility for sexual harassment is attributed to individuals, “other” cultures, and random circumstances, rather than the EP’s institutional structures.

Constructing sexual harassment as a private or cultural issue resulted in an emphasis on individualized actions and strategies, which decades of feminist scholarship has shown to be a typically right-wing discourse around the lack of gender equality. It foregrounds changing individual attitudes and behavior whilst ignoring structural change (see Kantola and Saari 2014). Our analysis illustrates how sexual harassment in the EP is still constructed this way, and favored across the political spectrum: a private issue resolved through individual agency. Surprisingly, this is not just the preference of right political groups, but also male and female liberal and conservative MEPs, which explains the difficulties in realizing meaningful structural changes.

There are rich seams of evidence, both in plenary debates and in our interview data, that exemplify this. For instance, during the plenary debate about the Resolution, Julie Girling from ECR argued:

if there’s fear of losing a job we can actually individually as MEPs do something . . . if there is an assistant out there who feels they are going

to lose their job, come and work in my office then temporarily, I will offer you a safe haven.

Another MEP from ECR also put forward such individual solutions. She suggested in an interview that:

There are certain strategies that you need to employ and certain . . . behaviors that you need to know as a young woman . . . in one case I had to speak to the member concerned and the poor person had no idea that his behavior was making other female colleagues and staff feel the way that they did. (ECR MEP 2:17)

In this lengthy citation, sensitivity to other cultures required these individual tailored solutions. Similarly, an MEP told us that as a young professional she had had to adopt individual strategies to tackle the possibility of sexual harassment. This meant that she would accept “a coffee but, not a dinner” (ECR Shadowing notes).

Changing men’s behavior was also a central solution. In the plenary debate about the Resolution, men—as a category—were called upon to get involved, to condemn sexual harassment. For instance, Linnéa Engström (Greens/EFA) argued in favor of more men acting as “role models in this fight.” Similarly, our interview data show that older men, in particular, were often constructed as in need of “training”:

. . . men need training too. Particularly older men. Sometimes, they will make remarks that are actually quite innocent to them but are very offensive for women. (ECR MEP 3:34)

In other words, constructing sexual harassment as a “generational issue” (ALDE Staff 18:40) and seeking to change older men’s behavior is perceived as key in this discourse.

In the comments above, sexual harassment is framed as both an individualized and an eminently solvable issue. In this discourse, it can be tackled through individual strategies of “offering safe havens,” having the right approach “as a young woman,” or if more powerful MEPs, including men, speak and act on behalf of women. It does not, however, permeate the institutional culture of the parliament as a whole, or demand legislative, cultural, structural changes. The effect of these solutions is that they create, or reinforce, a top-down power relationship between MEPs and APAs, where MEPs endorse a maternalistic/paternalistic role by confronting the “bully” and educating “young woman,” leaving APAs in a position of dependency.

Vivien Lowndes provides a more positive reading. She suggests that:

the communication of persuasive discourses about the impact of sexual harassment on women in public life via the ‘MeToo’ movement may

turn out to be more effective at dislodging embedded patterns of behavior than changing laws and policies; or such discursive mechanisms may serve over time to deepen the impact of these policies and help ensure compliance. (2019, 9)

In other words, changing the ways in which sexual harassment is talked about may in some cases be more transformative than institutional change.

The Good Institution

Some MEPs articulated a *good institution* discourse when discussing sexual harassment in the EP. We argue that this discourse is specific to debate in the EP and had not been articulated in previous debates on sexual harassment policy in the EU more broadly (Zippel 2008). This vision was mainly supported by officials in the EP, such as the EP President and the Anti-Harassment Committee President, namely people in positions of power who most identified with the institution.

For instance, during a public interview, when asked whether the parliament had a problem with sexual harassment, former EP President Antonio Tajani (EPP) answered “No . . . no There is a team working on this Nobody say to the team ‘I have a problem with sexual harassment’ There is a lot of propaganda against sexual harassment.” In this citation, the word ‘propaganda’ was a reference to #MeTooEP. Similarly, an MEP from EPP said to us: “the institution could be undermined when it actually does much better than others . . . when we work for the institution we must make it better, but not damage its credibility” (EPP MEP 51). This discourse stressed the imperative of protecting the EP’s reputation.

Our findings also show how this determination to protect the institution reverberated as a backlash on #MeTooEP. One reform suggested by #MeTooEP was characterized as foolish by a parliamentary assistant:

One should not forget that . . . the Committee is advisory and the final decision is devolved to the EP President . . . if we have a Committee with a majority of parliamentary assistants and legal and medical experts . . . there is no guarantee that the EP President will follow the Committee’s recommendation anymore. (GUE/NGL APA 32)

In the above view, the existing mechanisms—i.e. MEP’s dominant position in the Anti-Harassment Committee—ensured reliability. It also suggested that without safeguards, political vengeance could pass through.

Constructing the EP as a good institution was a way to criticize #MeTooEP with robust language, because the campaign had questioned its image. In the following quote, MEP Élisabeth Morin-Chartier (EPP), President of the Anti-Harassment Committee (from 2014 to 2019), says:

Here and there you'll hear about this and that happen I know some may fantasize on a blog . . . where everyone would spill out what they have to say You know, when we talk harassment, systematically people assume sexual harassment Naturally it is juicy . . . it makes the headlines. (joint press point, October 3, 2018, author's translation)

There was a visible tension between the Anti-Harassment Committee and #MeTooEP. While both claimed authority over the issue, a partnership was difficult: "There is no collaboration between the #MeToo and the Committee . . . only contacts . . . the Committee is official, statutory, whereas the blog is more like a spontaneous thing" (EPP MEP 51). This illusion established a hierarchy between a "spontaneous" unofficial campaign and the official institutional response through the Committee.

The *good institution* discourse places emphasis on using the EP's existing internal mechanisms to tackle sexual harassment by stressing the role of the Anti-Harassment Committee. Constructing the institution as *good*, this discourse does not entail change. The strategy is quite the opposite: to preserve and defend it. Hence none of Waylen's (2014) four dimensions of gender change—displacement, layering, drift, or conversion—are applicable. Instead, the discourse can be read as urging institutional stability and pushing back against advocates of reform as a form of resistance toward institutional change.

The solutions that arise from the *good institution* discourse utilize existing mechanisms in the EP and suggest improving them through legal mechanisms. For instance, one of our interviewees claimed that everyone has the right to challenge the Anti-Harassment Committee in Court:

If the way harassment . . . moral harassment . . . is dealt with in the Committee has evolved . . . it is because some persons who deemed that the Committee's functioning and procedure were not correct, complained before the Court. (GUE/NGL APA 32)

This solution was discursively constructed as both an ethical response and a justifiable opposition to the remedies advanced by #MeTooEP:

There exist legal battles . . . that, I believe, the MeToo movement cannot ignore . . . promoting a stance that discourages from taking action . . . saying that the official proceedings are not appropriate . . . for me, this is wrong. (GUE/NGL APA 32)

This solution sought to preserve the status quo and ignored the existence of additional gendered barriers when taking a sexual harassment case to court.

The reference only to moral harassment in the above citation reflected the Anti-Harassment Committee's inexperience; it had not dealt with any case of sexual harassment before 2019. This type of remedy, one that depends on existing institutions and that values stability over progressive change, is mirrored in other contexts too. In the Nordic countries, discourses about the women-friendly welfare state, and myths about achievement of gender equality, have acted against the recognition of remaining inequalities and finding efficient solutions to them (Kantola 2006; Martinsson, Griffin, and Nygren 2017).

Harassed Workers

Unlike the above discourses, #MeTooEP articulated a *harassed workers discourse*. We use this term to underscore how it foregrounded the category of workers over power relations and hierarchies between different staff categories and MEPs. Through this discourse, #MeTooEP managed to frame and politicize the issue in novel ways, distinct from the *abuse of gendered power* discourse discussed above. Whilst those articulating the latter were MEPs in institutionalized power positions in the parliament, the *harassed workers* discourse had an activist emphasis and was directly targeting the EP (Berthet 2019). A further difference between these two discourses, which we discuss below, was that the solutions put forward by the *harassed workers* discourse were concrete and practical, based on EP's workers perspective.

In their blog, #MeTooEP answered "Who we are" with the opening sentence: "We are workers of the European Parliament." Similarly, a female staff member explained in an interview to us: "we want a safe space for workers . . . we want to change the structure . . . this blog is the voice of the voiceless " (S&D APA 45). The position was echoed by a man staff member who explained: "We want to create a safe space for all workers and we are here to represent all workers" (#MeTooEP press conference, October 19, 2018).

The language of protecting and representing the workers departed from that which constructed women as victims of sexual harassment. The subject position of "worker" was more empowering than "victim," and also less gendered. It provided a clear focus for the campaign: it was about EP's workers and not exclusively about political representatives. However, it may also be that not all victims of sexual harassment in the parliament identified with the category of "workers"; arguably, it may have been alienating to some—those who held views, for instance, more aligned with the political right, or a presumably different class position, for instance in senior positions of expertise. Like all discourses, this one too, despite its empowering attempts, may be exclusionary.

The particular moniker of *harassed workers* also underlines its combative tone. A campaign representative stated "we are here to fight" (#MeTooEP press conference, October 19, 2018). #MeTooEP was unapologetic, uncompromising, and ready to provide a harsh critique—for example: "The Committee makes the Parliament look prettier . . . but it does not work"

(S&D APA 45). On the one hand, #MeTooEP was struggling against the EP's positive image as champion of democracy (*good institutions* discourse) and gender equality (*abuse of gendered power* discourse) whereby, in appearance, the EP already monitored the issue. On the other hand, they faced potential denials of the issue's seriousness (*private and cultural* discourse) and the slothful pace of positive change within the institution.

The combative language was combined with feminist and democratic ideals such as "safe spaces" and "public interest," illustrated by the following:

Some people have thought of the blog as a threat, whereas it is a tool in our common, public interest. Some have reacted by saying it is dangerous, but the blog merely does what the Parliament should do. (S&D APA 45)

This statement highlights internal conflicts on how to prevent and end sexual harassment. Whilst some defended the blog as a shelter, others saw it as a dangerous threat.

For instance, some actors in the EP tried to contain #MeTooEP. A #MeTooEP spokesperson described how they "lose so much energy in terms of backlash" when, for instance, invited to talk at an event; one EP Vice-President from the EPP called the organizers "to cancel my intervention because I was sending a bad image of the European Parliament" (conference panel, European Parliament, January 30, 2019). This citation powerfully shows how discourse about protecting the reputation of the institution, and the associated construction of anyone who challenges that as a "trouble maker," often came from the EPP.

Interestingly—and unexpectedly—some MEPs from green and left political groups were also critical of #MeTooEP for being "hijacked by men and turned into nothing more than a hypocritical hashtag is worse than nothing" (GreensEFA MEP 10:24). Similarly, an S&D staff member believed that #MeTooEP "is not in line with the group . . . [In] the group we want to support whistleblowing, but I think the first approach should be to solve it in, inside" (S&D Staff 46:40). Both citations illustrate the political struggles and contradictions which surrounded #MeTooEP and its work on combating sexual harassment in the EP. They also highlight different approaches within political groups.

The *harassed workers* discourse constructs sexual harassment as such a deep, fundamental, and far-reaching problem that solutions need to be transformative and changes fundamental. In contradistinction to the language of *good institution* discourse, here the remedies go beyond institutional layering. Unlike the *abuse of gendered power* discourse, #MeTooEP solutions are based on an assessment of workers' daily struggles and seek concrete immediate changes in both the working conditions and the parliamentary culture. They seek meaningful reforms of both formal institutions (changes in rules and procedures)

and informal institutions (norms and culture). In terms of institutional change, they constitute attempts at displacement (Waylen 2014, 219), for creating new institutions to replace the old rules; including informal gendered norms. For instance, this #MeTooEP spokesperson suggested “to [write] rules” that go beyond political “declarations condemning a certain kind of behavior” (conference panel, European Parliament, January 30, 2019).

Reassessing MEPs’ responsibilities and workers’ conditions of employment was also a recommendation of #MeTooEP:

What we said from the beginning is that immunity cannot mean impunity ... so we need to reconsider what is the sense of immunity ... and also freedom of mandate ... we need to work on the precariousness of certain work contracts ... [workers] need to have guarantees otherwise it’s a double penalty ... you’re a victim and you also may lose your job. (conference panel, European Parliament, January 30, 2019)

This solution suggested deeper forms of redress by targeting parliamentary structures (i.e. representative privilege and conditions of employment) as a further means to combat sexual harassment. Earlier, we alluded to the fact that parliamentary immunity could offer institutional protection to sexual harassers. #MeTooEP sought to redefine these two institutional rules, parliamentary immunities and freedom of mandate, in favor of transformative change.

However, the interview material reflects different views about transforming parliamentary privileges. For example, some resisted the idea of obligatory training for MEPs because they “are directly elected from the citizens, so you cannot really put too many obligations” on them (S&D Staff 46:40). Another interviewee, also aligned with the political left, said to us that public discussions about ways in which the Committee is dysfunctional may be harmful as it may discourage some victims from coming forward and isolate them (GUE/NGL APA 32). This illustrates how far-reaching critiques, and their associated changes, can also be problematic: they are either unrealistic, or they actually make others more vulnerable. It also highlights differences within political groups.

The battles over remedies to sexual harassment were highly visible in the EP. They were marked by different notions of institutional change, and often accompanied by obvious ideological directions. MEPs on the political right were more likely to speak about individual solutions, stressing the agency of both victims and perpetrators. These discourses constructed gender in strictly binary terms: “young women” who needed to develop coping strategies, and “older men” who required training in how to behave. Institutional change was ruled out by definitional fiat in these discourses. In contrast, MEPs on the political left emphasized structural issues, isolating the problem less as the sum of individual actions, and more a question of a culture permeated by gendered institutional norms. Interestingly, MEPs from established pro-EU

groups on the political right were more comfortable with existing institutional procedures and those who defended them, whilst Eurosceptics and right populists, were more likely to seize upon opportunities to question the EP's legitimacy, albeit not in the name of gender equality. #MeTooEP politicized several issues, including the ways in which the EP's institutional regime (Anti-Harassment Committee, parliamentary working conditions, immunities, staff employment contracts) enabled sexual harassment. One of the most visible parts of the debate has been whether to require MEPs and staff to take part in compulsory training about sexual harassment. Our analysis explains why even this was, and remains, not an easy solution.

Effects of the Discourses for Institutional Change in the Parliament

Finally, we provide answers to our third research question about the effects of discourses on institutional change in the Parliament. First, institutional changes did occur in 2017 and 2019, respectively. They included voluntary pilot training for MEPs, which started after the Resolution's vote, and a new institutionalized code of good conduct which included an explicit reference to sexual harassment (paragraph 5). Using soft language, it specified that MEPs "may not be elected" to certain positions if they did not abide by it, and "should take part in specialized training" (paragraphs 5 and 7). Each MEP's declaration appeared on the EP website, along with their declaration of financial interests, in the 9th legislature (2019–2024).

Second, several staff members of political groups and MEPs confirmed the creation of some new rules in political groups. Examples included: training for all at the political group level (GreensEFA Staff 41:6); training of selected staff members who will then train managers, heads of unit, deputies, and secretary generals (ECR Staff 19:12); the appointment of confidential counsellors (ALDE Staff 18:40); and finally, new anti-harassment guidelines for some political groups (GUE/NGL Staff 26:18). For instance, when asked about whether the ECR group had an Ombudsperson, like the GreensEFA, a member of staff told us:

No. No we don't . . . we have recently had two of our people have completed . . . courses . . . We have been told, that this is the way to go . . . it's born out of the sexual harassment issue. (ECR Staff 19:12)

Similarly, a staff member from ALDE told us:

We have . . . new rules in place after the #MeToo affair . . . collective effort with all the groups, at, our level . . . we have counsellors, (confidential counsellor), inside the group and external counsellors (so) people can go. (ALDE Staff 18:40)

Thus, some new rules and practices were evident at the political group level, yet they varied greatly between groups.

Whilst constituting clear signs of progress and impact of the #MeTooEP campaign, these new rules may have institutional weaknesses. We read them as examples of *layering* in institutional change, where new rules are introduced on top of old ones and not in competition with them (Waylen 2014, 219). This is a common strategy in trying to achieve change toward more gender-equal practices, but with well-known shortcomings that were recognized by some of our interviewees. For instance, this #MeTooEP spokesperson described the new measures' weaknesses, which even if thoroughly enforced, may not lead to the transformative change they sought:

The code of conduct? The one you get when you for example enter a position, you sign it and you give it back . . . they sign it and give it back, they don't care about it. It's just a formality. (ALDE APA 31:43)

Mandatory training was also greeted with some scepticism by MEPs on both the political right and left. As a structural issue, sexual harassment will not stop just by saying that it is wrong, suggested one MEP in our interviews:

I believe that people, some people do things because they can. Not because they don't know that it is not okay . . . so I don't believe that mandatory training would change the situation. (EPP MEP 8:18)

Another MEP from S&D also explained how counterproductive training could be:

The training they gave us was all about rape and sexual violence and literally didn't mention at all, sexual harassment in the workplace. So all the middle-aged white men who actually need some training . . . went away thinking that because they weren't actually rapists, it's all fine. (S&D MEP 13:40)

These interviewees suggested that such training fulfils the role of "ticking the box" for good practice but has not yet proved to be meaningful.

Feminist institutionalism helps to explain how MEPs and staff are embedded in settings where their actions are shaped and constrained by "institutional rules that distribute power along gendered lines" (Lowndes 2019, 5). Because of this, implementing new gender-equality measures, such as mandatory training, were inefficient and frustrated gender-equality actors in the EP. Furthermore, measures such as training and signatory codes of conduct do not change structural imbalances, which enable sexual harassment in parliamentary contexts. In the EP, they included precarious work contracts for MEPs' personal assistants (hired based on "trust"), and the MEPs'

freedom of mandate, and meant that institutional changes, such as they were, remained soft and powerless.

Conclusion

This article analyzed four competing discourses that coalesced around debates on sexual harassment in the EP. Sexual harassment was constructed either as a *gendered abuse of power* deeply rooted in society; as a *private or a cultural issue*; as something only solvable through the EP as a *good institution*; or as an *harassed workers* discourse focusing on the power hierarchies at stake in the EP. The first two discourses have long roots in European sexual harassment policy debates (Zippel 2008). The latter two were more novel and specific to debating sexual harassment in a parliamentary context.

Each discourse conditioned debates differently: some heightened the prospect of significant institutional change, while others considerably limited the possibility. A systematic discussion of interplay between discourses and proposed institutional change was a key contribution of the article. Both the focus on sexual harassment as a gendered abuse of power and the harassed workers discourse called for new institutions with new rules and practices. In contrast, the constructions of sexual harassment as a private or cultural issue did not question the EP's gendered structures identified by the former. In this discourse, institutional reform was indirectly resisted because sexual harassment was seen as inevitable in a culturally diverse workplace, where behavior change was an individual responsibility. Similarly, the good institution discourse promoted the notion that sexual harassment was either somewhat overblown by those wishing to undermine the institution's integrity, or that the consequence of individual agency were not structural features of the institution.

Some MEPs on the radical right were happy to critique the parliament but this had more to do with their Euroscepticism than support for those campaigning against sexual harassment. Other MEPs, from the more established political groups, such as the EPP, were more concerned to protect the establishment, both against Eurosceptics and #MeTooEP. They had a powerful position in the EP and were willing to cut short the growing number of initiatives by quickly voting for, and implementing, immediate solutions, however fragile. Contradictions were equally apparent on the political left. While most of #MeTooEP's activists belonged to groups on the left and center (GUE/NGL, GreensEFA, S&D, and ALDE), our data show that some interviewees from these political groups profoundly disagreed with the campaign's methods and objectives. For instance, they objected to the public nature of the #MeTooEP blog, regarding it as unethical and making people even more vulnerable through exclusionary tendencies.

While #MeTooEP aimed for transformative changes at multiple levels, such as re-evaluating parliamentary privileges and immunities, reassessing

worker's employment conditions and protection, reforming the Anti-Harassment Committee's composition and training MEPs and staff on sexual harassment, the real outcomes were far less ambitious. With the weak addition of a code of conduct, and few patchy, unharmonized, measures at the political group level, responsibility to tackle sexual harassment remains on individuals (mostly young women workers) and their strategies. The evidence strongly suggests that even in a presumably gender-equal institution such as the EP, it is profoundly difficult to manifest substantive change. Sexual harassment remains a deeply polarizing, political, and gendered issue.

Notes

Valentine Berthet is a PhD student in the ERC project EUGenDem in Gender Studies, Tampere University. Her thesis focuses on the gendered violence policies and practices in the European Parliament's political groups.

Johanna Kantola is Professor of Gender Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University. She is the director of the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant project EUGenDem (2018–2023), which studies the European Parliament's political groups from a gender perspective. Her books include *Gender and Political Analysis* (with Emanuela Lombardo, Palgrave, 2017), and *Gender and the European Union* (Palgrave, 2010). She has co-edited *The Oxford Handbook on Gender and Politics* (with Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, and Laurel Weldon, Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Gender and the Economic Crisis in Europe: Politics, Institutions and Intersectionality* (with Emanuela Lombardo, Palgrave, 2017). She is the editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Gender and Politics Book Series with Professor Sarah Childs.

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PUBLICATION IV

Mobilization against sexual harassment in the European Parliament: the MeTooEP campaign

Valentine Berthet

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Mobilization against Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament: The MeTooEP campaign

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Valentine Berthet 

PhD Researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University,
Tampere, Finland

Abstract

The international #MeToo campaign against sexual harassment constitutes the most prominent contemporary campaign against sexual harassment worldwide. It exposed the issue by undermining the 'culture of silence' prevailing in several contexts, including political institutions. This article analyses one specific variant of #MeToo, the campaign MeTooEP that emerged in the European Parliament (EP). MeTooEP is unique in many ways: it was the first collective action against sexual harassment in parliaments emerging in the #MeToo aftermath and it was the first collective action *within* the EP led by members of the staff, which eventually drove some internal policy changes. Using a unique, large interview dataset, the analysis shows how the actors behind MeTooEP were crucial in shaping the campaign. Their knowledge of institutional rules, practices and daily presence *in* the EP facilitated their advocacy and transformed the Parliament into an enabling platform for their actions. With the help of Feminist Institutionalism, the analysis demonstrates how the formal and informal institutional EP bodies with their rules and regulations shaped MeTooEP in ways that constrained and empowered it.

Keywords

Sexual harassment, European Parliament, #MeToo, MeTooEP, feminist institutionalism

Introduction

The international #MeToo campaign became the most prominent and visible contemporary campaign against sexual harassment worldwide. First used in grassroots activism by

Corresponding author:

Valentine Berthet, PhD Researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland.
Email: valentine.berthet@tuni.fi

US activist Tarana Burke in 2006, in 2017 #MeToo became a global campaign on Twitter and proliferated across countries and industries. By creating space for people to speak up and address their experiences, #MeToo revealed the amplitude of sexual harassment and provoked social, cultural, political and legal changes in ways that undermined the 'culture of silence' and carved spaces for new discourses (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). For instance, in Argentina, feminist activists drew on #MeToo to advocate for abortion legalization (Garibotti and Hopp, 2019). Simultaneously, #MeToo was questioned for its ability to engender enduring social changes (Rosewarne, 2019), to reform patriarchal institutions such as parliaments (Krook, 2018) and to challenge complex, intersected systems of inequalities (Ghadery, 2019; Phipps, 2019).

This article contributes to these debates by analyzing a specific local application of #MeToo, the staff-led campaign against sexual harassment in the European Parliament (EP): the MeTooEP. Unique in many ways, MeTooEP directed the gaze inward, towards the Parliament's internal policies and practices.

Sexual harassment is a well-researched topic, studied as a form of violence against women in the workplace (Zippel, 2006) and in politics (Collier and Raney, 2018; Krook, 2018). Additionally, in the literature, feminist mobilization is considered central to policy changes (Banaszak, 2014, 2010; Montoya, 2013; Weldon and Htun, 2013; Zippel, 2004) and the formal and informal institutions shaping such a mobilization are well-researched (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Kenny, 2013). Yet, studying MeTooEP brings unresearched perspectives on a collective bottom-up action against sexual harassment *from within* the institution it sought to reform, furthermore a parliament consisting of formal and informal institutional rules and regulations (Krook and Mackay, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010). Thus, a central objective of this article is to analyse how MeTooEP emerged in the EP and how it strategically adjusted to its institutional context. The success and/or achievements of the MeTooEP are not the focus of this article, as they have been discussed elsewhere (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). Rather, the focus here is on the actors and institutional mechanisms that shaped the campaign, its agenda and strategies. Theoretically, the article uses feminist institutionalism to analyse how the campaign was influenced by the Parliament's institutional rules and bodies. Concepts of 'Women's Movement in the State', 'femocrats' and 'governance feminism', with their theoretical tenets, also contribute to analysing the findings. The article asks the following research questions: First, how did MeTooEP actors shape their campaign *within* the European Parliament and with what consequences on the campaign and themselves? Second, how did the European Parliament's institutional bodies and rules constrain or/and empower the campaign? The article draws on a large interview dataset with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and parliamentary staff, complemented with MeTooEP's blog, Twitter account and recorded conference appearances.

The findings demonstrate how MeTooEP actors shaped an influential campaign by mobilizing their personal resources and skills. Notably, their position in the European Parliament, as parliamentary assistants or political advisors, meant they were experienced with institutional rules and knew how to use the Parliament as a strategic platform for their actions. One major drawback of the campaign, however, was its lack of diversity. The analysis shows further how MeTooEP handled the Parliament's formal institutional rules and bodies, such as the Rules of Procedures, the Anti-harassment Committee and

the political groups, as well as policy documents on sexual harassment, such as the EP Resolution on sexual harassment and abuse in the European Union (EU).¹ The findings also illuminate the EP's informal institutions. In the following sections, the article first looks at the MeTooEP as a case in point, and then briefly reviews theoretical approaches relevant to analysing the campaign.

Approaching the case: MeTooEP and the European Parliament

The European Parliament is often described as a supporter of gender equality policies (van der Vleuten, 2019). It reached a record-breaking 40.4% of women elected MEPs in the 9th legislature (2019–2024; *ibid*). Yet, recent research questioned it as a unified actor by dissecting its political groups' approaches to gender equality and showed that unequal gendered practices persist (Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). For instance, when issues of sexual harassment surfaced in the EP, political groups had to take position as either supporting or resisting new anti-harassment measures. While groups on the left supported new anti-harassment measures and reform, those on the right defended existing measures and resisted institutional change (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). As the analysis shows below, political groups on the left were also better allies to MeTooEP.

At the same time, the European Parliament's self-built reputation of a promoter for gender equality (van der Vleuten, 2019) and its Committee on women's rights and gender equality (FEMM) comprising key actors in the promotion of supranational gender equality policies, make the Parliament a friendly environment from which to base a campaign against sexual harassment. Particularly, the EP contributed to the adoption of the 2002 EU Directive on Equal Treatment in which sexual harassment was defined as sex discrimination (Zippel, 2004, 2006). However, never before had MEPs publicly discussed sexual harassment as an internal problem. Soon after the international #MeToo campaign spread on Twitter in 2017, MEPs discussed their own experience of sexual harassment in parliaments for the adoption of a non-legislative resolution on combating sexual harassment and abuse in the EU (hereinafter 'the Resolution'). Despite lacking legislative 'teeth', the Resolution successfully brought media attention to the issue of sexual harassment within parliaments. As it remained unimplemented, MeTooEP used the Resolution as a basis for its claims, thus illustrating a bottom-up approach as staff members requested the implementation of a resolution voted by MEPs.

Furthermore, in the European Parliament, the Rules of Procedures guide political work and MEPs' behaviour. In 2006 and 2007 these Rules were reformed to introduce new penalties for MEPs showing inappropriate behaviour, including Rule 11 which bans defamatory, racist and xenophobic language or behaviour (Brack, 2017: 127). However, the Rules mentioned only briefly sexual harassment² and overlooked sexist language and behaviour. In addition, the Parliament had an Anti-harassment Committee since 2014 dealing with complaints made by members of the staff against MEPs. It comprised of six members nominated by the EP President with an equal representation of MEPs and staff, and a gender balance.³ However, there is no indication that the members were trained to review sensitive cases. The Committee had not dealt with a single case of sexual harassment before 2019, when MeTooEP voiced critics. Appearing as inefficient, the Committee defended the Parliament as a 'good institution' (Author,

2020) and often described the sanctions in place as sufficient.⁴ Yet, when found guilty, MEPs' sanctions remained financial and included relocating the complainant in another office while the salary remained on the MEP's budget.⁵

Key to the emergence of MeTooEP was a particular radio interview during which one socialist MEP revealed the existence of a notebook, kept by one staff member, in which were recorded anonymous testimonies of sexual harassment within the European Parliament since 2014. This information directed media attention towards the Parliament and its internal practices.⁶ Taking advantage of the momentum, several EP workers, such as parliamentary assistants, policy advisors, trainees and civil servants, gathered to form MeTooEP. Together, they created an organized staff-led campaign in the European Parliament to demand an end to sexual harassment. Their first action consisted in launching a petition calling for the implementation of the Resolution voted in 2017 by the Parliament. They had three requests, which all correspond to the Resolution's recommendations: (1) a mandatory training for all MEPs on sexual harassment; (2) changing the composition of the EP Anti-harassment Committee to ensure independence and impartiality; and, (3) an audit by independent experts of the EP Anti-harassment Committee's work to review its functioning. A second action consisted in launching an online blog⁷ in which the testimonies previously recorded by hand were digitalized and accessible to all. To increase visibility, MeTooEP officially launched the blog during a press conference organised within the European Parliament with MEPs and journalists being present, on 9 October 2018. A third action consisted in the creation of a pledge which specifically targeted candidate MEPs to the 2019 election, thus propelling the issue of sexual harassment into the election campaign. In the pledge, MeTooEP asked candidates to symbolically commit to working towards ending sexual harassment in the Parliament if elected. As of May 3rd 2019, over 300 people signed the pledge, including EP President Antonio Tajani (EPP) and MEP Élisabeth Morin-Chartier (EPP), President of the Anti-harassment Committee between 2014 and 2019, despite their public disapproval of the MeTooEP campaign.

These actions illustrated how MeTooEP worked hard to expose the sexual harassment problem in the Parliament, the political contestations around it and the flaws of the parliamentary procedures to prevent it.

Feminist institutionalism and governance feminism

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) developed theoretical tools to deconstruct institutions, including the rules, norms and practices (i.e. "the rules of the game") that structure political, social and economic life (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). According to FI, institutions, like parliaments, should be understood as gendered because they reconstruct and reinforce gendered inequalities. FI stresses the importance of informal rules, instead of only formal ones, and show how they constrain and enable gendered actors (Chappell, 2006; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Mackay et al., 2010). For instance, while MeTooEP emerged out of the informal 'silences' and 'inactions' (Chappell, 2014) of the Parliament in relation to implementing the Resolution and preventing sexual harassment internally, it also benefited from formal institutional resources, such as political group meetings, to consolidate its actions.

FI allows to analyse how MeTooEP and the EP institutional rules and bodies interacted with one another, and as the analysis shows, how MeTooEP's actors directed theirs and the parliamentary resources to the advantage of their campaign. The analytical framework is sensitive to the mechanisms through which MeTooEP was simultaneously empowered and constrained by the Parliament, its institutional rules, practices and bodies, and how they shaped the campaign. For instance, Petra Ahrens studied how the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), in spite of its lower status in comparison with other committees, used parliamentary rules and routines to maximise its influence and turned institutional disadvantages into strategic advantages (Ahrens, 2016). Like FEMM, MeTooEP's capacity to act was influenced by its institutional setting, with the difference however that MeTooEP had no official status in the Parliament and its activist nature brings new perspectives. The article also considers the 'gendered logic of appropriateness' in institutions that constrain actors in certain behaviours and encourage others (Chappell, 2006). While MeTooEP actors disrupted some informal rules by showing disloyalty to the EP, they were not necessarily aware of rules and routines they saw as "unquestioned ways of operating" (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). It means they had internalized the Parliament's functioning as they had indisputable knowledge of how things work in it but, in some cases, lacked critical perspectives.

In addition, the role of feminist actors within state administration, known as 'femocrats' despite their heterogeneity, captured scholars' interest who developed the concept of 'governance feminism' to designate "the incremental but now quite noticeable installation of feminists and feminist ideas in actual legal-institutional power" (Halley et al., 2006: 340). Despite the fact that MeTooEP actors did not present themselves nor the campaign as feminist, these theoretical concepts help analyzing the campaign's agenda and strategies (Banaszak, 2010). Like other actors, femocrats are influenced by their background and career aspiration (ibid.). Yet, unlike other actors, these can dilute their role in bringing feminist ideas into political institutions. Indeed, the institutionalization of feminist ideas can lead to their co-optation towards other political goals or to their silencing (Elomäki and Kantola, 2017). For this reason, scholars have argued that states were intrinsically patriarchal and could not be dismantled from within (Caglar et al., 2013), thus highlighting the limitations of seeking to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools (Lorde, 1984). Nonetheless, "the efforts of 'insiders' gender justice advocates" (Chappell and Mackay, 2020) must continue to be scrutinized and MeTooEP offers a pertinent casestudy.

Methodological considerations and research material

The article contends that institutions are fluid (Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014), dynamic (Chappell, 2006) and what is considered appropriate can alter overtime (Katzenstein, 1998). Questions of identity and subject positions of MeTooEP actors (Banaszak, 2010) are relevant to the method as are questions of institutional constraints facing feminist activism (Chappell, 2006; Chappell and Waylen, 2013). Like discourse, power always matter (Foucault, 1972, 1980). It is omnipresent and makes every aspect of social life political. Further, this article is methodologically inspired by the concept of

Feminist Critical Friendship (Chappell and Mackay, 2020), which encourage researchers to be attentive to the institutional context and strategic possibilities of actors seeking change. It allows to consider the “small wins” of actors, their efforts within institutional constraints and to avoid putting unrealistic expectations on them (Chappell and Mackay, 2020: 3). In analyzing the role of actors in shaping the campaign, and the institutional settings constraining it, the article contends that actors both support and challenge the European Parliament by “creatively exploit[ing] institutional ambiguities” (Chappell and Mackay, 2020: 10).

First, for this qualitative research the material consists of 63 interviews with MEPs and political staff conducted at the end of the 8th legislature, between 2018 and 2019, at the height of the MeTooEP campaign. The interviews formed part of a larger project on the gendered practices and policies of the European Parliament’s political groups, providing a rich insight on the institutional setting of MeTooEP. Interviews were semi-structured and followed a guide with questions covering issues of sexual harassment, the existing parliamentary preventive measures and about MeTooEP. Some were face-to-face interviews but others were phone interviews, thus lacking body language and hiding discomfort caused by some questions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and coded on AtlasTi by members of the research project. Codes were developed deductively and inductively as part of several team meetings. Research diaries were systematically used to ensure consistent interpretation of codes. For the purpose of this article, the codes ‘Sexual harassment’ and subcode ‘Sexual harassment_MeTooEP’ were selected and analyzed separately with its own coding scheme. The coding scheme included themes such as internal strategies, like MeTooEP alliances, knowledge and network in the EP and external strategies, like their communication outreach on Twitter. It also included paying attention to the role of institutional bodies, rules and practices (formal and informal) which led to the identification of constraining factors, such as attempts to silence the campaign, and enabling factors, such as providing a direct access to facilities and equipments promoting the campaign. In the subsequent analysis, to avoid the identification of interviewees, citations respect the following anonymous patterns: political group; position in Parliament; AtlasTi number (e.g. S&D staff 53:7).

Second, the research includes supplementary material, such as MeTooEP Twitter account and blog. Like #MeToo, MeTooEP is a multi-sited campaign, taking place both physically in the EP and online. Finally, it includes audio and writing recordings of conferences and events attended by MeTooEP.

Finally, a brief reflection on MeTooEP’s representation is pertinent to the methodological aspects of this article as the campaign may have been exclusionary to some and thus cannot be said to represent, analytically, all EP workers. First, MeTooEP actors were in majority white Europeans, thus mirroring the largely white institution in which they were embedded. All were highly educated and polyglots; all were employed; and only one man appeared involved in the campaign. Second, all belonged to political or administrative EP services, thus overlooking the situation of workers in the cleaning and maintenance services. Most belonged to political groups on the center-left to left (the socialists S&D, the liberals ALDE/Renew, the greens Greens/EFA and the left GUE-NGL). Third, their trade unionist message (Berthet and Kantola 2021) may have discouraged staff members on the political right, and MEPs were excluded from the campaign’s membership and

objectives. Nonetheless, to some extent, MeTooEP showed hints of being a feminist movement: its logo displayed the purple colour, usually assimilated with feminist protests, and their message conveyed feminist ideas, such as reflections on power relations and structural inequalities.

A campaign shaped by its actors

MeTooEP aimed to shape a campaign for *all* by constructing a message of “safe space for everyone” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:14; S&D staff 8:7). For them, sexual harassment was an issue affecting every EP worker, regardless of their position. First, the findings highlight the endemic nature of sexism in the everyday parliamentary work. In the following citation, one interviewee said:

“when you (...) start working in the EP you start seeing (...) a lot of sexism and one of the things that drove me was that it was completely normalized. No one was complaining about it. A lot of harassment situations were integrated as a normal thing.” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:13)

Outraged by the internalization of sexism in the EP, MeTooEP actors refused to see harassment as the ‘cost of doing politics’ (Krook, 2018) and fought back for institutional change (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). Their message used a universal language and reflected their desire of inclusivity: “We want to be a safe space where everybody can come and can share their experiences (...) We want to (...) integrate everybody” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:30). This strategy constituted an effort from insider advocates to frame a space of feminist resistance within rigid and gendered sites of governance (Chappell and Mackay, 2020).

In addition, all actors in MeTooEP had formal employment in the European Parliament. To get such employment, they went through the most competitive hiring process and were thus highly trained and qualified to work with parliamentary rules. As a result, they quickly developed internal and external strategies to capture institutional resources. Externally, they posted short videos on Twitter presenting the campaign in several languages (French, Italian and Spanish) and their blog channeled testimonies of sexual harassment *within the EP* to the outside world (See Mendes et al., 2018 for online activism). Internally, their daily access to parliamentary premises, otherwise strictly restricted, allowed them to campaign against sexual harassment *in the EP* by sticking flyers on walls - something campaigning *outside* the Parliament could not have allowed. In addition, being insiders meant they had access to a broad range of network and communication services, usually reserved for parliamentary work. This was well illustrated in the following citation:

“it’s personal networks that we had within the parliament. There is this TV studio on the third floor where they have all kinds of camera equipment. (...) [It] helped us develop our message in a relatively professional way. We had a printing service. We know how to write speeches. We know how to develop a social media strategy. We know (...) which buttons to push to become (...) known on Twitter. We know a lot of journalists.” (S&D staff 2:30)

“To know” and “be known” was clearly an asset MeTooEP used extensively to become influential. This also included the strategy of targeting political actors in the

European Parliament, such as elected MEPs and leadership. It meant, for instance, to get “the information at the right time and to share it with the people we think it’s essential they know so they can push for [it]” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:14). All these strategies combined together, internal and external, shaped an influential campaign with actors ready to take advantage of their position *within* the EP for internal lobby. As a result, their message of protection against sexual harassment *for all* became visible and created a space for resistance and demands of institutional changes (Berthet and Kantola, 2021).

Nonetheless, as have intersectional theorists pointed out, unequal social structures intersect along the lines of gender, class and race, and position workers differently in relation to harassment (Crenshaw, 1989; Kagal et al., 2019). These intersecting systems of inequalities exist in the European Parliament too and were not addressed by MeTooEP’s universal message. While intersectionality highlights differences between individuals, universality stresses sameness. By delivering a message for *all*, MeTooEP overlooked differences between EP workers and were exclusionary to some. One example was how the non-political staff of the Parliament, in catering and maintenance services, often employed locally in the two French-speaking cities of Brussels and Strasbourg, were overlooked by the campaign despite facing sexual harassment too. Their weaker working contracts, their isolation within the political, international and English-speaking EP machinery meant they could not access a campaign essentially communicated in English. As illustrated by the following, MeTooEP knew the problem:

“it’s a bit tricky how to really do it because there is hardly any unions and (...) I wouldn’t necessarily know who to talk to. If not only by talking to the men and women who actually serve the coffee... to approach them personally but... being approached by somebody and asked : do you feel harassed in your workplace and do you want to talk about it? I just find that not very empathetic.” (S&D staff 2:45)

This citation reveals the limitations of achieving institutional changes with an intersecting perspectives. The communication gap between the political and the non-political staff of the EP prevented meaningful reforms. It echoes feminist critics of #MeToo for institutional reforms (Ghadery, 2019; Phipps, 2019). Whilst MeTooEP actors naturally knew how to convey their demands to the EP leadership, they did not know how to support non-political staff. As Kimberlé Crenshaw explained, feminist mobilizations too often failed women of color for not addressing racism (1989). As *insiders*, MeTooEP’s actors had internalized EP rules, norms and practices, including racialized practices, despite wanting to change the gendered practices of sexual harassment. This was theorized by Feminist Institutionalists as a ‘gendered logic of appropriateness’ according to which institutions, through formal and informal rules, norms and practices, encourage certain behaviour and discourage others (Chappell, 2006). Despite MeTooEP’s demands for institutional changes, some behaviours were “unquestioned ways of operating” (Chappell and Waylen, 2013) which limited their strategies to acceptable means of operating (Banaszak, 2010) and reproduced other inequalities.

Finally, MeTooEP’s objectives were also constrained by its actors’ level of institutionalization. The material revealed MeTooEP’s actors *loved* the EP and *feared* for their

career. These emotions necessarily shaped their choice of actions. They were unlikely to use radical means (Banaszak, 2010). Some started to be seen as experts and were invited to panels and conferences, indicating they became a reference for European discussions about harassment in politics (Greens/EFA Staff 1:26). They also highlighted the development of their personal skills, as explained in the following citation:

“I (...) think [it] has given me expertise on structural questions and big institutions... the reasons why the power hierarchy in the parliament is so extreme” (S&D staff 2:38).

For career-oriented and ambitious young political professionals, being labelled as an activist can be problematic. One interviewee said:

“If you google my name it’s quite clear what I am involved in. This is not going to be erased. (...) I’m still relatively young and there is going to be situations where this is going to be a problem” (S&D staff 2:7).

Notably, some received warnings by colleagues that they “will not find any job in Brussels” if remaining so involved (S&D staff 2:33). These citations showed that MeTooEP actors were put ‘under the radar’ (Banaszak, 2010) and their institutionalization level limited the campaign to ‘respectable modes’ of action.

A campaign constrained by its institutional context

MeTooEP was born within the EP, an environment far from neutral. To study MeTooEP requires to study its institutional settings by exploring how it shaped and resisted the campaign. The analysis draws attention on how MeTooEP actors adjusted to constraints and maximized their chances (Ahrens, 2016). MeTooEP targeted five key institutional components 1) the 2017 Resolution on combating sexual harassment and abuse in the EU; 2) the employment contracts; 3) the Anti-harassment Committee; 4) the Secretariat and the Bureau; and 5) MEPs and political groups. The analysis shows how MeTooEP actors, embedded in parliamentary institutions knew what to lobby and how.

First, the 2017 Resolution was an official text adopted by the EP that became the basis of MeTooEP’s demands. The Resolutions’ recommendations were: a mandatory anti-harassment training for all employees; an independent anti-harassment Committee; and a taskforce of independent experts. By being a formal policy document, the Resolution empowered MeTooEP by legitimizing its claims. Second, the EP employment contracts were quickly identified as a major problem. Hired by MEPs, accredited parliamentary assistants (APAs) can be fired if and when MEPs lose their trust (Corbett et al., 2016). Such lack of protection deterred workers from reporting abusive MEPs because it could lead to them losing their jobs. This vulnerability was illustrated in the following citation:

“[MEPs] just do as they please. (...) There’s just a bunch of let’s say crazy people who should really not be managers but who still are and who just implement a hire and fire principle that is extremely problematic that destroys people psychologically at times” (S&D staff 2:41).

This interviewee referred to the informal ‘hire and fire’ practice used by MEPs and permitted by the lack of employment protection. The ability to choose and change APAs was conferred to MEPs as a guarantee of their political independence (Pegan, 2017) and, enshrined in the Rules of Procedures, it is a formal rule protecting democracy, hence difficult to reform. Alternatively, MeTooEP pushed for an obligatory anti-harassment training for MEPs. Yet, for similar political independence reasons, the EP cannot impose obligations on MEPs. These formal and informal rules protecting MEPs’ political independence played against MeTooEP by limiting their chances of reform and discursive spaces, which eventually led to weak institutional change with the introduction of a code of conduct for MEPs (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). Feminist scholars criticized such weak institutional reforms “nested” into old ones as reinforcing patriarchal practices “under the guise of change” (Collier and Raney, 2018: 796). Third, the Anti-harassment Committee influenced the campaign as it embodied the EP’s official response to sexual harassment as opposed to an informal campaign. MeTooEP criticized the Anti-harassment Committee’s composition because most of its members were MEPs. Therefore, reporting an abusive MEP in front of other MEPs was described by the campaign as a barrier for victims. The following citation mentioned clearly this bias:

“I (...) always found it extremely worrying that whenever I told people about the structures that existed in the EP nobody felt like approaching them” (S&D staff 2:1).

On the contrary, having MEPs sitting in the Committee was perceived by Committee members as a guarantee of legitimacy in case sanctions were taken, and against ‘political revenge’ (GUE/NGL staff 32:7). As a formal institution, the Committee was seen as legitimate by the EP leadership that supported it (GUE/NGL staff 32:6; EPP MEP 51:2). MeTooEP and the Committee emerged as two opposing actors and their relation grew tense. MeTooEP accused the Committee of making the EP “look prettier” by covering up structural problems with “cosmetic changes” (S&D staff 8:16) and the Committee accused MeTooEP of being no more than a “spontaneous thing” unlike the Committee’s “statutory” nature (EPP MEP 51:2). The Committee members were not anonymous and could easily be found on the EP website.⁸ For instance, during the first half of the 9th legislature (2019-), the Committee was chaired by socialist MEP Monika Beňová (S&D). Conservative MEP Anne Sanders (EPP) and liberal MEP Gilles Boyer (Renew Europe) were also members. This lack of anonymity further demonstrated the EP’s lack of competence to handle cases of sexual harassment and to guarantee the independence of its Anti-harassment Committee members. The Committee shaped MeTooEP by emerging as its direct institutionalized opponent, whose actions were supported by the EP leadership. It constrained the campaign by occupying the available space and discourse shaping sexual harassment issue in the EP (Berthet and Kantola, 2021).

Fourth, the two formal institutional bodies of EP Secretariat and Bureau constrained MeTooEP by resisting change. Unlike the Bureau – composed by EP President and Vice-Presidents, changing frequently after election – the Secretariat remained steady independently of elections. Both the Secretariat and the Bureau mattered for MeTooEP because they were responsible for implementing the Resolution mentioned above.

Only men have occupied the seats of EP Secretary-General since 1952.⁹ In the EP administration and leadership, gender matters (Kantola and Miller, 2022) because gendered practices can obstruct institutional changes. Feminist scholars have conceptualized such administrative resistance, under the form of ‘inertia’, as embodying an unsupportive hierarchy for insider gender advocates leading to implementation gaps (Ahrens, 2018). For MeTooEP, lobbying the Bureau mattered because the European Parliament is a “bureaucratic” institution, therefore, “knowing the information [was] key” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:14) to prevent implementation gap. This was well illustrated in the following citation:

“Even if there is a Resolution like the one that we are basing our fight on, it’s only the Bureau that takes the decision and that tells the administration what to change... if there is just a positive vote on some Resolution that doesn’t change anything... that is really an experience from this movement” (S&D staff 2:15).

To prevent such inertia, MeTooEP lobbied the Bureau by meeting them, asking them “to take some sort of concrete action” (S&D staff 2:53), such as sending “an email to the whole parliament” (ibid.). These were “small wins” (Chappell and Mackay, 2020) for MeTooEP as the Bureau remains a hierarchical institution difficult to approach. Asked if it was easy to schedule an appointment with the Bureau, one interviewee answered, “at times yes... if they themselves are slightly interested but some of them have never met us” (S&D staff 2:54). The research material also reported instances where the Bureau tried to silence MeTooEP by informally calling the organizers of an event, in which MeTooEP was invited to speak, in order to block their intervention (S&D staff 8:12; S&D staff 2:33), in view of protecting the Parliament’s notoriety (Author, 2020). As a result, the Secretariat and Bureau, both gendered institutional bodies (Kantola and Miller, 2022), constrained MeTooEP both passively – ‘inertia’ – and actively – by silencing the campaign. (Ahrens, 2018)

Lastly, elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and their political groups were two key institutional bodies for MeTooEP as they helped and empowered it. Political groups constitute important financial and material resources for MEPs, allowing them to do their legislative work (Bressanelli, 2014). Even if only few political groups supported MeTooEP, they constituted an important access to resources otherwise inaccessible to the campaign. When supportive, MEPs and political groups were powerful platforms for MeTooEP’s claims and message. Unsurprisingly, MeTooEP was typically helped by groups from the center-left (ALDE/Renew, S&D) to left (Greens/EFA, GUE-NGL), as illustrated in the following citation:

“we also work a lot with groups and for now it has been the Greens, S&D and Renew and GUE that have been supporting us a lot. We have had MEPs from these groups that have been like our champions (...) if your political group (-) agree, they also empower you” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:24).

The collaboration between the two formal institutional bodies – MEPs and political groups – and the informal campaign – MeTooEP – was necessary to raise the problem of sexual harassment in key locations. For instance, MeTooEP gained informal access

to political groups meetings, which were formal settings in which MEPs of a same group debate and negotiate political decisions. The campaign was also mentioned in plenary debates, which are formal settings in which MEPs from all political groups debate, vote and raise particular issues. Such platforms were invaluable for articulating claims against sexual harassment in a prominent manner and empowered the campaign as illustrated in the following citation:

“With them we have been working and we have asked them to raise these issues in the plenary. We have asked as well to go with meetings because at some point it’s also a political issue that the members have to back. We have had the support of many people of these groups and also from the presidents. They have also written letters to the president of the European Parliament and letters to the Bureau members supporting as well our cause” (Greens/EFA Staff 1:24).

By receiving support from some MEPs and political groups, MeTooEP gained access to a broader audience. Therefore, the formal and informal EP institutional bodies and practices discussed above, such as the Anti-harassment Committee, the employment contracts, the Secretariat/Bureau, the ‘hire and fire’ practice and the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the administration, have all constrained MeTooEP by competing with it, discouraging it and channeling down their objectives (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). Yet, in the struggle, MeTooEP gained “small wins” (Chappell and Mackay, 2020), such as the introduction of voluntary anti-harassment training for MEPs, and received both direct and indirect support from the Resolution, elected MEPs and political groups by making it legitimate and visible in key location.

Conclusions

The article showed that the actors behind MeTooEP were key to the campaign’s growth. By mobilizing their personal skills and networks, by developing internal and external strategies and by crafting a clear message of anti-harassment protection for all, they developed a leading campaign *within* the European Parliament that soon became well-known across the European Union. However, the absence of intersectional perspectives within the campaign’s composition, objectives and message was one significant pitfall. It left some non-political staff of the EP excluded from the campaign’s scope.

In terms of its institutional settings, MeTooEP actors unquestionably knew what to do and who to target, which helped them adjusting to institutional constraints and integrating some institutional resources. For instance, the 2017 adopted Resolution became the foundations of MeTooEP’s claims, legitimizing their action, and some MEPs and some political groups empowered them by giving them a platform in group meetings and plenary debates. On the other hand, the difficulty to reform the EP Rules of Procedures and to change employment conditions, the unsupportive hierarchy of the Bureau and the Secretariat and the competition against the formal anti-harassment Committee all acted as constraining factors. The analysis showed the institutional barriers faced by the campaign that are well-known in feminist literature of institutional reforms. Nonetheless, because MeTooEP existed *within* the EP, it benefited from an extensive variety of resources otherwise unavailable to outsiders. It included access to the EP communication

services, journalists and a direct and unlimited access to decision-making premises, such as the plenary and political group meetings. To this extent, the Parliament facilitated the development of MeTooEP.

In conclusion, despite MeTooEP continuous lobby and despite the collective effort of its skilled members, the rigid institutional settings of the EP considerably restricted the campaign and led to weak outcomes for internal institutional reforms. In the aftermath of the campaign, some changes were implemented both at the Parliament and the political groups levels. It included a new internal harassment strategy and a mandatory training for MEPs belonging to the Greens (Greens-EFA); the introduction of confidential counsellor system in both the Socialist group (S&D) and the Left (GUE-NGL) where incidents of sexual harassment can safely be reported; and, a new code of conduct that MEPs must sign at the beginning of their mandate. These changes remained patchy and limited, despite the prominent role played by MeTooEP as demonstrated in this analysis. Future research on internal campaign could investigate the European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI) which, in view of MeTooEP's success, may employ similar strategies to promote its mission of racial equality and non-discrimination in the work of the EP.

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ORCID iD

Valentine Berthet  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5447-1180>

Notes

1. European Parliament, Joint motion for a resolution on combating sexual harassment and abuse in the EU 2017/2897(RSP), 25.10.2017
2. Annex Ia of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament (February, 2019)
3. Bureau decision of 2 July 2018, Article 6.
4. For more, see documentary in French: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-C-MujWAONc&feature=youtu.be>
5. Ibid.
6. See for instance <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-struggles-to-handle-harassment-cases/> and <https://www.politico.eu/article/sexual-harassment-brussels-faces-its-own-demons/>
7. www.metooep.com
8. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20190829STO59918/how-parliament-is-run-president-vice-presidents-and-quaestors-infographic>
9. <https://europarl.europa.eu/the-secretary-general/fr/biography-and-responsibilities>

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