# Parliamentary Politics and Polarisation Around Gender: Tackling Inequalities in Political Groups in the European Parliament

*Johanna Kantola*

## Introduction

Gender equality is at the heart of political representation, democracy and European integration, and its position as a core value of the European Union (EU) is enshrined in the various treaties. The conditions for good democracy require that everyone can freely express their views, unconstrained by hate speech, sexual harassment or stereotypes that challenge expertise (Galligan, 2015). The European Parliament (EP) upholds gender equality as a legitimate value and norm in its public statements and policy positions and works towards being a gender-equal institution. Its various gender-related measures suggest that gender equality is

J. Kantola (✉)
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
e-mail: johanna.kantola@tuni.fi

221

a legitimate norm guiding parliamentary work and the achievement of democracy.

Nevertheless, in contemporary European politics, gender equality has become highly contested. Importantly, in the 2008 global economic crisis, the EU failed to uphold the norm of gender equality and prioritised economic concerns (Elomäki, 2021; Jacquot, 2017; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). Furthermore, the rise of radical right populism has led to a fundamental contestation of gender equality and LGBTQI rights, constructing their advancement as harmful elite projects and ideologies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The EP is not isolated from these developments. Despite strong beliefs in neutrality, fair distribution of positions and the centrality of factors other than gender being decisive in EP decision- and policy-making, extant research shows how gender has continued to shape the practices and policies of political groups (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). Furthermore, the number of MEPs who oppose gender equality and women's rights rose to over 30% (around 210 of 705 MEPs) following the 2019 EP elections, essentially doubling in comparison to the previous legislature (Zacharenko, 2020).

In this chapter, I analyse the internal functioning of political groups within the EP from the perspective of gender equality. Rather than focusing on gendered policies and policy-making processes, the chapter focuses on the ways in which political groups are perceived by MEPs and EP staff in terms of working as gendered actors. To do this, I examine both remaining gender inequalities and the various practices for advancing gender equality. The research questions are as follows: How do MEPs and political staff perceive gender equality within their political group? How do MEPs and political staff construct the role of gender equality measures and practices within political groups?

The chapter draws on a large qualitative dataset of 135 interviews with MEPs and political staff conducted in 2018–2021 during the final year of the eighth legislature and the first years of the ninth legislature. The interviews covered all political groups and formed a representative sample of countries and genders. The analysis shows that the interviewees in the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) and the Left Group (GUE/NGL) constructed gender equality as a fundamental principle of the groups, which was upheld with formal and informal practices. The interviewees from the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the Renew Europe Group (formerly

Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE), perceived gender equality as an important but flexible norm. The interviewees from the Group of European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP), the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) and the Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group perceived gender equality as a highly contradictory and divisive issue. Finally, the radical right populist Identity and Democracy (ID) group (formerly Europe of Nations and Freedom, ENF) saw gender as a dangerous construct; for them, attempts to advance gender equality within political group practices was derided as nonsense. The findings illustrate that gender has become polarising: staunchly supported by some groups, who recognise the short-comings in achieving gender equality, and vigorously opposed by others as irrelevant or dangerous. The chapter also provides internal distinctions among the political groups: gender equality is contradictory not just within conservative or radical right populist groups but also within some left groups, and it can also be supported by some conservative and populist actors.

## Researching Gendered Inequalities and Gender Equality Practices in Parliaments

This chapter brings together two dimensions, usually kept apart when analysing the gendered workings of political parties and parliaments: (i) *gendered inequalities* within political groups and (ii) *practices for promoting gender equality* within political groups aimed at remedying these inequalities. Bringing the two together arguably adds insights to the dynamics around gender equality in political groups. It enables the pinpointing of consistencies and contradictions within political groups: if gendered inequalities are identified and gender equality is upheld as a norm, are there actual practices aimed at tackling the problems? Alternatively, even if gender equality is seen as a non-starter by some groups, they may have some measures in place. The chapter is based on the insight that analysing both gendered inequalities and gender equality practices within political groups results in richer and more nuanced findings. This section discusses each approach in turn.

There is a long tradition of gender and politics research analysing gendered inequalities as instrumental in shaping women's chances of being elected to political office. In recent years, this tradition has also generated important research and findings on the EP. In the EP, member

state electoral systems, the use of gender quotas and the characteristics of political parties have been shown to impact the share of women in political groups (Lühiste & Kenny, 2016; Sundström & Stockemer, 2022). More specifically, political party ideology matters a great deal for women's political representation in the political groups within the EP, with the left (GUE/NGL), green (Greens/EFA) and liberals (ALDE) performing better than the radical right populist groups (ECR; EFDD) (Sundström & Stockemer, 2022, p. 12). Other studies have shown that women MEPs are more likely to come from left-leaning parties, which are more likely to employ gender quotas (Lühiste & Kenny, 2016). Chiva (2014), however, suggested that the left/right division does not hold for women's descriptive representation and Central and Eastern European countries. Building on these debates, Aldrich and Daniel (2020) found that quotas actually help promote women with prior political experience, thereby raising the number of politically experienced representatives at the European level.

Once in office, women's political careers and the quality of their representative work are shaped by the gendered inequalities in parliaments (Erikson & Verge, 2022). In the EP, extant research shows that, first, gendered leadership structures and expectations have led to women being more equally represented in policy leadership (in committee chair and coordinator positions) than in political (political group leaders) or administrative (secretaries general) leadership positions (Kantola & Miller, 2022). Second, patterns of gender-based discrimination have been identified. Women members of staff and parliamentarians are subjected to sexual harassment, which severely limits their work chances (Berthet & Kantola, 2020). Racist and sexist language has also been used in EP plenary debates, creating a hostile, discriminatory atmosphere towards women and minoritised politicians and staff and for the advancement of gender equality and women, minority and LGBTQI rights (Bartlomiejczyk, 2020; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021). Third, gendered inequalities include the long working hours culture of the EP and the difficulties involved in combining political work and care responsibilities. Parliamentary work continues to be influenced by gendered expectations and stereotypes, with the economic sphere being particularly resistant to women's contributions (Elomäki, 2021; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). These gendered inequalities create a toxic environment, especially for young women MEPs (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019; see also Erikson & Josefsson, 2022). Finally, the strengthening of radical right populism and its anti-gender agenda within the EP (Zacharenko, 2020) challenges

gender equality and creates a polarising and hostile atmosphere towards its advancement (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021).

These gendered inequalities also appear at the level of political groups. Similar to women's descriptive representation, left and green groups have been shown to perform better in terms of advancing gender equality than conservative and right groups (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016, 2019). The pattern is not uniform, however, as there are internal contradictions. Examples include undemocratic gendered practices within the left and green political groups in terms of informal institutions (Kantola & Miller, 2021). In relation to sexual harassment, MEPs from some political groups, such as the EPP, were more interested in the reputation of the institution than addressing the problem of sexual harassment (Berthet & Kantola, 2020). However, opposition to a firm stance from the EP against sexual harassment has also faced opposition within the left S&D (Berthet & Kantola, 2020). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the EPP is of particular concern (Kantola & Miller, 2021, 2022) and that its brand of gender conservatism poses challenges to the advancement of gender equality policy-making within the EP (Elomäki, 2021). In sum, extant research suggests that political groups are gendered in different ways.

There is much less research on the *practices for promoting gender equality within the political groups* in the EP. As mentioned above, gender quotas and their effects have received a great deal of attention, including in relation to the EP. At the parliamentary level, such equality guarantees translate into formal rules for gender equality, for example, for the leadership positions outlined in parliamentary rules of procedure or political group statutes (see Ahrens and Kantola; Bressanelli in this volume). Beyond such guarantees, a wider range of gender equality measures are needed in order to eradicate the complex and structural gendered inequalities outlined above. Gender-sensitive parliamentary frameworks lay out such measures at the parliamentary level (Childs & Palmieri, 2022). At the level of political groups, these may include aspects such as gender action plans based on identifying gendered inequalities within groups; institutionalising the position of gender mainstreaming in all political group policy-making; gender training for policy-making and countering sexual harassment and obtrusive behaviour; equal allocation of speaking time and other political resources (offices, staff); commitments to gender equality in all decision- and policy-making and measures against sexual harassment. Feminist institutionalism adds an important analytical dimension to these gender equality practices. Measures can be formal and formalised in the

workings of political groups and enshrined in statutes and other guiding documents. Alternatively, they may be informal and unwritten, constituting 'the ways that things are done around here' (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

## Research Data and Methods

The theoretical thrust of the chapter is constructionist in nature. The interview research material was not treated as descriptions of objective truth about gendered inequalities and gender equality practices within the political groups examined. For example, denials of problems of equality by the radical right populists needed to be analysed rather than taken at face value. This held for all the interview citations. In line with discursive approaches to gender equality (Lombardo et al., 2009), the citations were treated as constructions of reality, some of which are dominant and all of which have effects on the ways in which gendered inequalities can be understood and tackled. To address the complex questions about the ways in which gender equality and the practices for promoting it are constructed at the political group level, the chapter drew on a large qualitative dataset of 135 interviews with MEPs and political staff conducted over the course of the eighth and ninth parliaments in Brussels, Strasbourg and online (Table 10.1).

The interviews form part of a larger study about the gendered practices and policies of the political groups within the EP, which was carried out by

**Table 10.1** Interviews with MEPs and staff at the European Parliament 2018–2021

| Political group | F MEP | M MEP | F staff | M staff | 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 (EP secretariat) | – | – | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| Total | 41 | 31 | 34 | 29 | **135** |

members of the European Research Council (ERC)-funded EUGenDem research project. The interviewees included MEPs, their assistants, political group staff and parliamentary staff. They were semi-structured, with questions about the political groups' work, leadership, gender equality and policy-making practices as well as the lives of MEPs/staff. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

The interviews were coded by the team members using Atlas.ti. The codes were developed jointly and covered both topical and theoretical areas. As a general rule, the team members were encouraged to use codes as extensively as possible to secure full coverage of important empirical material. The codes analysed in this chapter include both 'gendered practices' and 'gender equality practices', with subcodes on discrimination, division of labour, hierarchies, inappropriate behaviour, gendered interaction, sexist language, gendered expertise and sexual harassment. Using the Atlas.ti reports, the interview material was analysed and compared in an iterative process to isolate the perceived gendered inequalities and the ways in which the groups were addressing them. Additionally, the most recent political group statutes were read and analysed.

## Gender Equality as a Fundamental Principle: Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL

The assumption in the literature is that left/green parties are more amenable to gender equality than conservative/right-wing parties, an assumption borne out in the research material: the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL interviewees perceived gender equality as a fundamental principle guiding the work of their respective political groups. Gender equality as a central part of the political group's identity was discussed in the interviews by all genders and by both MEPs and staff. Intersectionality was somewhat recognised, and gendered inequalities were seen as inextricably linked to other areas of inequality such as race, ethnicity, class, disability and sexual orientation. There was a willingness to recognise challenges involving gender equality within one's own political group, and the interviewees referred to the formal and informal gender equality practices with which their group attempted to tackle these challenges.

In the representative interview quotations, which were typical of the data, one GUE/NGL staff interviewee said that the political group 'is a good place' in terms of gender equality (GUE/NGL Staff F 070220). The interviewees from the two groups typically mentioned the gender

balance in terms of the MEPs numbers they had reached; the fact that the groups were co-chaired by a woman and a man; the general secretary being a woman and gender balance being sought when filling key positions, including the bureau, coordinators, committee chairs and different working groups. To substantiate these claims, the actual numbers showed that women constituted 53% of the Green/EFA MEPs and 41% of the GUE/NGL and that both groups were co-chaired by a woman and a man. The Greens/EFA group had two women serving as committee chairs, while at the GUE/NGL, it was one man. The coordinator positions were equally divided (Kantola & Miller, 2022).

The interviewees from both political groups conceded that there were remaining gendered inequalities and that there was 'room for improvement' (GUE/NGL Staff M 210220; Greens/EFA Staff F 100320). The extant literature is replete with examples of these inequalities, including the persistent gendered division of labour, namely women's and men's areas of political expertise. For example, one Green/EFA MEP suggested that agriculture is 'quite a men's issue' in EU politics in general as well as in the political group, as were the environment, finance, industry and research; however, 'human rights and FEMM, gender aspects, social things, then you will have much more women' (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320). Other specific gendered inequalities mentioned specifically included discrimination in the form of inappropriate behaviour (GUE/NGL MEP F 100320). Such inequalities accumulated in the positions of young women politicians (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). One interviewee described that the young woman leader of the group had to earn respect—it was not automatically granted to her with the position (GUE/NGL Staff F 160320).

One of the central problems emerging from many of the interviews with the Greens/EFA MEPs was that speaking time was unequally divided into group meetings with men dominating. This was systematically mentioned in a number of interviews variously describing how and why men felt entitled to 'talk, talk, talk' and do it in a 'competitive way' (Greens/EFA MEP F 130320; Greens/EFA MEP F 190319; Greens/EFA MEP F 210120; Greens-EFA MEP F 300919). The interview material contained different explanations, with some being related to beliefs about 'how women and men are', while others explained that it was a consequence of speaking time being distributed by national delegations chaired mainly by men (Greens/EFA MEP F 300919). The position of the heads of national delegations exemplifies informal rule—heads of

national delegation speaking first—undermining a general commitment to gender equality.

### Practices for Promoting Gender Equality

The gender equality practices of the Greens/EFA were institutionalised in the group statutes. In the bureau, half of the chair posts were to be held by women (3.9). The statutes stated that the group shall have an ombudsperson as a complaints-, conflict-solving and reporting mechanism (4.-4.3). The ombudsperson writes a report every two years and is an MEP elected by group staff (Greens/EFA Staff F 210319). The group also commits 'to full gender equality' in staff practices (5.3). Beyond the statutes, gender balance was a strong norm for the way in which the group operated when nominating and selecting MEPs for different positions. This was described as follows: 'we have a lot of internal rules which are not in the statutes and are implementing rules which are not in the statutes, where practically the question of the gender balance is completely, completely covered' (Greens/EFA Staff F 200319).

The Greens/EFA developed their gender-mainstreaming measures in the eighth parliament and shifted the focus to an internal gender action plan in the ninth parliament. The group implemented a practice whereby all the policy briefings produced by staff were to include a section on gender impacts. This was accompanied by trainings on gender equality issues for all staff members (Greens/EFA Group Staff F 100320; Greens/EFA Staff F 210319). There was also mention of the need to develop a monitoring process at the next stage in order to assess whether this was implemented, thereby making the practices more effective (Greens/EFA Staff F 100320). In addition, the group held mandatory training for MEPs and staff on sexual harassment (Greens/EFA Staff F 210319), an approach considered highly controversial in many other groups (see Berthet & Kantola, 2020). The group had also created a 'network of confidential counsellors' consisting of two women and two men as 'first entry points' in harassment cases (Greens/EFA Staff F 210319). The Greens/EFA approach can thus be characterised as proactive and not just reactive in relation to gender equality.

The GUE/NGL had no statutes in place. Since 2014, there has been a working group on 'GUE/NGL rules of procedure', but there has been no consensus. It was suggested to us in written communication that the confederal character of the group complicated and obstructed all kinds

of decision-making processes and that it was not uncommon to not reach agreement on a topic (written communication GUE/NGL Staff 030419). The interviewees said that promoting gender balance was, in any case, a strong practice in the group and described how gender equality practices were informally institutionalised. Gender balance was considered when dividing committee positions and in relation to speaking time in group meetings, where the group leader 'tries to have alternate female and male speakers on the speakers list' (GUE-NGL Staff F 150519). The group had also funding ear-marked for gender equality events (Feminist Forum around 8 March) (GUE-NGL Staff F 150519) and had a harassment policy, which included training.

The diversity of practices for gender equality in these two left–green groups illustrates the range of practices that can be adopted by political groups to address remaining gender inequalities. Such practices can be either formal or informal and can be efficient in the presence of political commitment within the political group.

## Gender Equality as a Flexible Norm: S&D and ALDE/Renew

The S&D and ALDE/Renew both achieved a good descriptive representation of women MEPs (43 and 47% in the 8th and 9th parliament, respectively) in their groups' push for gender equality policies within the parliament and applied gender mainstreaming in policy-making. The analysis of the interview data illustrates how gender equality became a more flexible norm than in the previous groups. More MEP and staff interviewees were lukewarm, ambivalent or indifferent towards gender equality, some of them even resisting it altogether. These groups are interesting because they potentially reveal what the deep-rooted gendered structures in political groups look like and how difficult it is to change them.

Typical of the S&D interview data were mentions of 'strong women' as 'important figures' and 'strong characters' within the group. The group was also singled out as 'the most feminist' by one male MEP (S&D MEP M 060320). A male staff member explained that achieving gender equality was 'organic' in the group. This meant that gender balance was 'not something decided politically; this is more organic, so it's the result of political process' (S&D Staff M 290419). Another male staff member echoed this by explaining that gender equality was 'the core DNA of our

group', which meant that 'It's not like you have to have special training or anything like that' (S&D Staff M 260219).

A number of ALDE/Renew MEPs and staff described the group's 'strong emphasis on gender equality' (ALDE Staff M 290119; Renew MEP F 060220). The liberal ideology of the group meant a stronger focus on individuals and equal opportunities as opposed to the socialist emphasis on structures and equality of outcome. As a female MEP put it, 'I'm quite hopeful that if somebody got elected to our group, they would be judged purely on their merit, and everybody has just the same equal chances to succeed because it's a priority for us to avoid any kind of discrimination' (Renew MEP F 060220).

The difference between the S&D and the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL groups is exemplified by the multiple allusions by the interviewees to a 'lot of problems' with gender equality in the S&D, that the group had 'a lot of bias' and needed to improve (S&D Staff F 060220). They argued that progress was hampered by the self-image that socialists would always 'fight for women' (S&D Staff F 060220). One male MEP said that gender equality was good at the 'formal level' in terms of female representation but continued to describe how the behaviour, language and attitudes of some male MEPs were inappropriate within the group: 'I think the levels of awareness of what is appropriate and acceptable are very, very low. It's still at the end of the day dominated by middle-aged men with traditional male attitudes and behaviours, and there's no significant countervailing force' (S&D MEP M 161018). Another male staff member spoke of the persistence of gendered stereotypes: 'People tend to comment on how women dress, when the man will not be judged by the way they dress or anything. It's simple things. I'm not saying there's abuse or anything like that, but it's the stereotypes. … Even they believe that they are not being sexist or anything. They are at the end of the day' (S&D Staff M 260220).

The interviewees discussed different gender-based hierarchies within the S&D. Men were still favoured because of seniority—an important factor when key positions were delegated. As one interviewee put it: 'while women are still looking where the toilets are in the parliament, as they don't even know where the toilets are, the men have already shared the jobs' (S&D MEP F 060320). The newcomers first have to learn the rules before they are even able to change them. It takes even longer to uncover informal rules. Even within the secretariat, there were still more men than women in top positions: 'the management positions are filled

by more men than women. And this is something that is not changing. Our former political secretary general tried to change that a little bit, and it was really good' (S&D Staff F 060220; also S&D Staff F 180220). Some of these issues were deep-rooted. For instance, gendered speaking time was partially explained by the fact that the largest national S&D delegations were chaired by men, who spoke first in group meetings (S&D MEP F 200220).

There were claims in an interview that young women MEPs of the Renew group were subjected to questioning relating to their expertise and patronising behaviour towards them in the parliament, though not in the group (Renew Staff M 130320). Individual-level explanations were characteristic of accounts of persistent inequalities: 'For example, in ITRE Committee,[1] from our group, there are more men. And in the LIBE Committee,[2] more women. But this is because of the will of the members. … It's not because of the group but because it is how women are: more interested in social issues, human rights issues. And they want to become members of these committees. And men are more interested in technology and so on' (ALDE MEP F 210219).

### Practices for Promoting Gender Equality

At the level of gender equality practices, 'organic' meant that, for some, there was no need for gender equality practices. As one senior staff member admitted, 'Luckily, gender balance is part of our political identity. Therefore, we do not need a specific strategy. It will catch colleagues' attention if we mostly quote male MEPs in the press release' (S&D Staff M 290419). In other words, when gender was thought of as part of one's identity, there was less of a need for specific measures and monitoring of whether gender balance was achieved as it was everyone's responsibility. According to the S&D group statutes (2014), the 'Group shall at all times operate according to the principles of equal opportunity and transparency' (Rule 16). It also contained a specific measure about gender balance in the bureau: 'it is necessary to ensure equal representation of women and men' (Rule 23). The ambivalences are described in the uncertain tone of the following citation:

> I think we have some internal rules as well. For instance, the bureau has some gender quota. I'm not sure about this. … There has to be the allocation of speaking time. For instance, in the plenary sessions, gender

representation in the debates also has to be respected. I'm not sure if it's always followed, but all these kinds of principles are to be taken into account when establishing the names of the members in the committee or something like that. The gender representation has to be considered. (S&D Staff M 260220)

A senior staff member explained how they tried to change the gendered hierarchies in positions by recruiting more men at the female-dominated assistant level (S&D Staff F 050320). They also conducted training so as 'to break a bit the unconscious bias about how women should only deal with certain areas of policies for instance' (S&D Staff F 050320).

The S&D staff members were highly active in the MeTooEP campaign against sexual harassment in the parliament (Berthet & Kantola, 2020). At the same time, the group itself faced challenges in implementing policies against sexual harassment. One of our interviewees maintained that MEPs were not expelled because of sexual harassment (S&D Staff M 260220). He called the training on sexual harassment 'a huge failure in terms of participation of members. They just don't engage in this initiative'. Despite being compulsory, participation in the training remained low (S&D Staff M 260220).

For the ALDE/Renew group, it was primarily down to individual MEPs to push for gender equality. As a female MEP said, 'we have quite democratic processes, so it's really up to participation. … So, yes be active and be vocal and have strong opinions and bring it out, and I think that we are a good place, to be there and listen' (Renew MEP F 060202). A senior staff member of ALDE told us that when, for example, distributing speaking time in the plenary, there was no focus on gender (ALDE Staff M 050419). The interviewee also described that, in the past, there was a 'raging debate' about quotas, which was settled against having a quota, and that the ALDE statutes from 2009 had no provisions on equality. Instead, individual commitment to vote women into leadership positions and a focus on merit were emphasised. In one of the interviews, a Renew female MEP group was also praised for its solidarity, networking and support (Renew Staff M 130320).

An analysis of these two groups showed the persistence of gendered inequalities, how they become entrenched in gendered structures and norms and how difficult it was to change them. Political ideology, such as liberalism and the priority given to individuals, shapes the ways in which equality is tackled.

## Contradictory Gender Equality: The EPP, EFDD and ECR

Three of the political groups in the two parliamentary terms under study can be deemed 'contradictory' in relation to gender equality. Most importantly, the biggest group in the parliament—the EPP—belonged to this category. It had the highest number of MEPs (187 in total, 34% women) and exerted a great deal of power, even if it has increasingly had to negotiate, including with other groups. The EPP has always been chaired by a man. It reached a near gender balance in committee chairs in 2019 (3 women and 4 men), representing a significant increase from 2014 (1 woman and 5 men). However, the coordinator positions remained male-dominated (82% men) (Kantola & Miller, 2022). The fact that it remains strongly conservative on gender issues explains much of the lack of progress in gender equality in the EP, for example, the lack of gender equality measures and gender mainstreaming in economic policy (Elomäki, 2021); the structural weakness of FEMM (Ahrens, 2016), its lagging behind in gender-balanced leadership (Kantola & Miller, 2022) and the lack of support for measures tackling sexual harassment within the parliament (Berthet & Kantola, 2020). A focus on the contradictory position of the EPP underscores the nature of the resistance to gender equality in the EP.

Placing the EFDD and ECR in this category highlights how a focus on gender and gender equality within a group can expose deep contradictions within them (intra-group dynamics). The EFDD was only part of the eighth parliament and was dominated by the uneasy coexistence of UKIP and the M5S (McDonnell & Werner, 2019). Their views on gender equality were often from opposite ends, with M5S being populist but amenable to gender equality concerns (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021). Altogether, 37.5% of the EFDD MEPs were women, and the group was chaired by a man. It had no committee chair positions (because of the *cordon sanitaire*, i.e. the practice of excluding radical right populists from key positions), and 35% of its committee coordinators were women (Kantola & Miller, 2022).

The ECR was also contradictory, with the British Conservative Party MEPs—especially women—speaking up for gender equality (Kantola & Miller, 2021) and the group exhibiting some progressive racial justice practices. Other national party delegations in the group were radical right populists, who were resented by some more moderate women MEPs

within the group (Kantola & Miller, 2021). Following Brexit, the political group became dominated by radical right populists, including the Polish PiS, and became more opposed to gender equality. The representation of women in the ECR was among the lowest of the parliament: 21% female MEPs in the eighth parliament and 32% in the ninth. There were two women committee chairs in the eighth and one woman and one man in the ninth. Twenty-nine per cent of the committee coordinators were women (Kantola & Miller, 2022).

Conservative political parties had long remained understudied by gender and politics scholars, and there were some expectations that conservative politicians could not or did not advance gender equality questions. This has since been disproved. Conservative parties and politicians both advance progressive, even feminist, politics or conservative gender equality policies (Celis & Childs, 2015). The EPP, for example, had an active group of women MEPs pushing for gender equality. Although it constituted a minority, it managed to change internal group practices and rally support (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019).

At the same time, however, a number of our interviewees said that the EPP was highly conservative in relation to gender equality. Traditional and misogynistic attitudes towards women were outlined in the interviews:

> There are obviously quite misogynistic attitudes sometimes in a very overt way. … There's also… it can also be very old-school respectfulness towards women as well. Men will be obviously embarrassed if you try to pay for things. … if you try to pay for both of you, it's unheard of and absolutely mortifying. So, it's very old-school traditional, and that would even be from people my own age. So they're in the classically traditional Catholic Christian democratic way of thinking. There's a misogynistic, rude asshole variety as well, but there's also that. (EPP Staff F 060320)

A similar level of harshness was described by one woman MEP in policy-making:

> For example, in (name of the committee), I'm rocking the boat and, quite literally, our coordinator who is a bit of, I don't know how to describe this redneck, but you know, he's shouting at me, he's disrupting me, he doesn't even allow me to explain, he's playing games, he's trying to throw me out of my nominated posts, he's using all these, you don't behave like that. (EPP MEP F 291118)

Later, in the same interview, the woman MEP discussed gendered expectations within the group: 'women are expected to be these kinds of useful allies, not to challenge the group position, the party position or anyone in a leadership position'. One female MEP called the group one of the most backward in the EP in terms of gender equality. She suggested that the group could be divided into three camps: one-third of whom were 'modern' MEPs in relation to gender, another one-third were 'maybe a bit conservative' and the last third were 'very conservative' and against women's rights, including direct opposition to SRHR and gender minorities (EPP MEP F 100320). When reflecting on the consequences of this, she said that in her first term in the parliament, she struggled to be perceived as competent by the older men in the group, something she had not faced in her home country politics for decades.

The EFDD interviewees did not address the issue of gendered inequalities within their group. They had a preference for expressing general views about gender equality. This can be interpreted as a strategy of distancing the problems elsewhere in the society and diverting attention away from one's own context. In the EFDD, gendered inequalities were constructed as questions of opinion: 'we don't believe in gender equality, so we simply have a difference of opinion about it [with M5S]' (EFDD MEP M 290119_3). One male MEP commented on the campaign against sexual harassment: 'I actually think this MeToo thing is nonsense. I disagree with it profoundly. I think that it makes doing any form of business utterly impossible. It's one of the reasons why I'm very reluctant to hire people' (EFDD MEP M 290119_3). The MEP also suggested that gender equality, LGBTQI rights and equality-related work 'goes too far' in the EP.

When asked to reflect on gender equality, the interviews portrayed a familiar strategy, with blame for existing inequalities placed on women. As this woman MEP from the EFDD suggested, 'What we've found is because women work completely different to men, and one of the faults of women is that they tend—and this has been proved to be true—to just do the job. They do it very well and they do it quietly. And they think people will notice them doing the job very well and doing it quietly. They don't make, they don't draw as much attention to themselves as what men do. And I think that's sometimes why women get passed over for promotions' (EFDD MEP F 290119_1). According to this appraisal, women should, in the famous words of Sheryl Sandberg, 'lean in' a bit more. Advancing gender equality does not require changing structures

but changing women—not even men—as women should aspire to meet the standards set by men.

### *Practices for Promoting Gender Equality*

Although it is typical for conservative political parties to oppose gender quotas, the EPP had a quota for the presidency of the group (consisting of a chair and ten vice-chairs), as explained below:

> When we did the presidency of the EPP Group in July, we have a gender quota for our presidency, which was respected. Then, a couple of the presidency members left as they got other positions in the parliament, but when filling them, the quota wasn't respected. So we haven't even respected our own quota now, which is worrying. (EPP Staff F 060320)

The formal rule in the political group statutes reads as follows: 'The Chairman *(sic!)* should ensure that, as a result of elections, the overall representation of members holding posts within the Group is composed of at least one-third of members belonging to another sex than the majority of members' (EPP 2013, p. 196). The interview citation above illustrates how such formal rules can be bypassed in political negotiations.

The other two groups, the EFDD and ECR, were opposed to quotas. In a very typical citation, one male MEP from the EFDD said that 'we don't believe in quotas, we believe in merit' (EFDD MEP M 290119_4). The opposition built between quotas and merit is a common construction against quotas, although this has been countered by research on the EP showing that quotas bring more competent MEPs to the parliament (Aldrich & Daniel, 2020). An ECR male staff member explained that the fact that the group had nominated women to important positions was 'entirely by accident' and had 'nothing to do with the fact that they were women'. He predicted that both 'negative' and 'positive discrimination' would be rejected by the group and particularly strongly by 'most of the women members' who have 'never made any demands for it' (ECR Staff M 200219). Similarly, a male MEP from the ECR explained to us that the group did not have 'any real policy of trying to get some sort of proportionality in its positions or anything like that' and that they did not want to do anything 'that's seen to be, in any way, providing a platform or an unfair basis of selection or promotion or encouraging people based on

gender, race or whatever. It's just simply a case of, well, whoever's the best person will get the job, and that's that' (ECR MEP M 120521).

In general, it was typical for these groups to seek solutions at the individual or private level. There were a number of manifestations of this in the interview material. In the ECR group, many interviewees mentioned the fact that the group had selected a disabled woman as the vice-president of the parliament and a Muslim as the co-chair of the group (ECR Staff M 200219; ECR MEP M 310119). These individual successes appeared to surprise those who viewed the group as racist, sexist or ableist and were used to portraying that individual merit was what mattered in the group.

Reflecting on the importance of the individual-level explanations in the EFDD, one male staff member said that their gender equality practices were based on the 'gender blindness' of the female secretary general of the group, who only focused on 'excellence, competence, and delivery'. He argued that this attitude was shared by the whole group (EFDD Staff M 070219). In the ECR, a male staff member said that instead of formal, permanent structures, there was an individual practice, 'an open-door policy' with the secretary general (ECR Staff M 180319). An ECR male MEP interviewee, who had advanced gender equality in the group through individual actions, explained how he had deliberately promoted women to certain positions because they were women but that he 'didn't wave a flag about it' (ECR MEP M 191219). Advancing gender equality could take place through such individual actions but was not to be celebrated in public or included in specific measures.

In sum, the analysis shows the contradictions that gendered inequalities and the advancement of gender equality with specific practices created for conservative and radical right populist groups. Thus, a focus on gender exposes divisions within these groups as well as the emergence of different forms of opposition.

## Irrelevant and Dangerous Gender: ENF/ID

The radical right populist groups ENF (8th parliament) and ID (9th parliament) built their political identities and ideologies in direct opposition to gender equality, intersectionality and LGBTQI rights. This opposition was voiced in plenary debates, with both direct and indirect opposition strategies to gender equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021). Radical right populist parties have often been seen as men's parties as the

majority of their politicians and supporters are male (Köttig et al., 2017). The ENF had 31% women and, together with the EPP, had the lowest number of women MEPs in the eighth parliament. Contrary to expectations, the ID group had 39% women MEPs, bringing it on par with the S&D and Renew groups, which were just above 40% women MEPs.

Our access to the ENF and ID groups was more difficult than to the other groups (see Table 10.1). Some of the responses to the interview invitations were openly hostile towards research on gender equality but were mostly met with silence. The analysis here is based on a total of seven interviews. A key issue emerging across the interviews was the perception of gender as irrelevant to the work of the group. One male MEP explained to us as follows: 'Our political view is that it doesn't matter that from which gender you are. You have to be good at work. So you can be a woman or man; it doesn't really matter' (ID MEP M 130320). The MEP continued that the political group had MEPs 'from both sides— I've seen many staff members from the women's side and many from the men's side'. A senior staff member from the ENF articulated the same view by stating that the group takes 'the best person': 'And whether that person is a man or a woman, it's not relevant to me really' (ENF Staff M 260419). The view was echoed by a woman MEP who said that 'whenever someone has to say something, he *(sic!)* simply says it. There is no difference whether it's a man or a woman' (ID MEP F 110320).

Resembling radical right populist strategies that are oppositional to gender equality in the plenary debates (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021), a female MEP interviewee from the ID group said that biological differences explained everything and should be understood and respected. She said that while 'men and women are created equally with the same rights', she opposed the idea that 'men and women want the same thing'. Rather, they are different: 'there is scientific data that very clearly show that men and women want different things, they have different—how should I put this—needs, they have different priorities' (ID MEP F 110320). This quotation exemplifies the selective appeal to science to prove sex differences and using this to explain societal differences, for example, gendered labour markets (women and men 'naturally' choose differently).

Practices for advancing gender equality, including quotas, were deemed 'ridiculous': 'So that's, we don't have any of this kind of, the quota system that we have to have, 50–50 or something like that. I think, for me especially, it's ridiculous so, [chuckles] personally, it doesn't matter from which gender you are' (ID MEP M 130320). Another male MEP

was committed to advancing the position of women in politics. He said that the group did not have 'many lessons to take from the opponents who speak about populists and women discrimination' in terms of the number of women in the group. He also stated that the political culture was not discriminatory and that female political representation was 'better representation. Not only that, but it's better working politically. It's my personal feeling and personal experience that introducing women into the political structures promotes the way the outcome of the work. So we've got to go further' (ID MEP M 120320).

## Conclusions

Both the representative work of MEPs and the political work of their staff continue to be shaped by gender. The findings of this chapter illustrate that despite differences between the political groups, gendered inequalities are persistent across the political spectrum. Such inequalities were seen as ranging from the unequal division of speaking time and committee positions to gendered expectations and hierarchies, inappropriate behaviour and misogyny. Gendered inequalities in political groups have become institutionalised as informal institutions and have thereby been normalised as ways of doing things in the EP. This makes it more difficult to change inequalities, turning them into questions about democracy and democratic practices: gendered structures can undermine individual politicians and staff agency and place them in pre-existing categories that have very little to do with their expectations and desires about political work in the EP.

Political group practices that enhance gender equality are also practices that make democracy work better. Only the Greens/EFA used their group statutes extensively for advancing gender equality. Other groups had only some or no provisions in their statutes, for example, for gender-balanced representation in key positions. There was also strong opposition to measures such as quotas within the radical right populist and liberal groups. Nevertheless, the findings also illustrated that practices fostering gender equality can also consist of informal norms, which can be effective. It was evident that a commitment to gender equality and the willingness to see gender inequalities were required to push political groups to adopt gender equality measures.

Gender equality is clearly an issue around which there is potential for political polarisation in the EP. Left, green and liberal groups

strongly support it; conservatives are more ambivalent and radical right populists oppose it. The findings also point to the differences within these groups and the contestation around gender equality within some left and liberal groups. For the purpose of democracy, it is important that gender equality remains a norm and goal and that the political debate centres on ways to achieve it rather than questioning and rejecting equality for political purposes. It is notable that the two groups that were most firmly committed to gender equality as a norm and to advancing it—the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL—were only the fifth and seventh in size. The perceptions, commitment and practices of the two largest groups—the EPP and S&D—remained decisive.

## Notes

1. European Parliament Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).
2. European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE).

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