

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

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## 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

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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).<sup>1</sup> The findings also illuminates on 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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-build 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 harassment<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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 blog<sup>7</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> For instance, during the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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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## 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](http://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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