

From Parliament to Party: The Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Group

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Gender-Sensitive Parliaments in Review

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

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

1. Equal representation in parliaments covers descriptive representation and captures access to and representation within the parliament (e.g., parity, leadership positions, and committee membership). Overcoming a gender binary understanding of equality and addressing intersectional aspects, particularly along race, class, and age, is particularly crucial.
2. Gender equality in policy-making relates to substantive representation and comprises the main duties of parliaments: legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and ensuring policies address and reduce gender and intersectional inequalities.
3. Equal participation of societal interests involves both descriptive and substantive representation and encompasses connecting with the broader public, e.g., experts, movements, and civil society in hearings and through other participatory tools.
4. Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization speak largely to symbolic representation (i.e., discussion styles, rituals, language, room names, childcare facilities, art, etc.). It also steps into descriptive and substantive representation with, e.g., topics like parental leave, pregnancy, or the securing of a violence-free (working) environment.

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

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

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

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

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

3. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups and Representation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups and Policy-Making

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Groups as Workplaces

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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