

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

2. Common Approaches to Studying Gender-Sensitive Parliaments

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. Background of the INTER PARES Study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. Implementing MSC in the INTER PARES Study

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

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

We implemented MSC in five steps:

1. *Identifying domains of change*: Potential SoCs were originally identified through the survey with parliamentary administrations and the written input from equality bodies and academic experts. Given the variety of parliaments, expectable gender-sensitive changes and outcomes were initially unclear as were the appropriate criteria for identifying and evaluating them. We considered revealing the importance or significance of a variety of changes core to the project. Although domains of change can be “deliberately fuzzy” in MSC to “allow people to have different interpretations of what constitutes change in that area” (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 18), participants needed guidance in conceiving stories to report. We therefore asked participants to relate significant changes to the survey domains which were primarily identified top-down, i.e., by researchers, practitioners, experts from INTER PARES, and the advisory group. However, participants could propose alternative domains in the questionnaire.
2. *Collecting SoCs*: To collect SoCs, we used the open-ended survey questions and additional written input from stakeholders. We invited participants to share them in any format (undefined word count, no style guidelines, etc.), and to send additional information (e.g., websites, documents, press releases,

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Gains and Challenges of the MSC Approach

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

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

4.1. Gains of SoCs—Three Illustrative Cases

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2. Remaining Challenges of the MSC Approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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