

Parliament as a Workplace: Dilemmas of Vernacularisation and Professionalisation

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Abstract

In this article, we engage with recent calls to research parliaments as gendered workplaces, which build on earlier international discursive turn and institutional reform initiatives towards gender-sensitive parliaments. Our engagement explores this workplace framing and how well it translates across pluralised, global parliamentary paradigms. We develop our arguments with a special focus on the Indian parliament as a gendered institution. Viewing the parliament as a gendered workplace through an intersectional lens, we show how gender dynamics and institutional configurations of power are embedded in class, race, and caste inequalities but can shift over time through reflexive challenges. We organise our discussion through two approaches to studying parliaments as workplaces—vernacular and professional—to argue that paying attention to these approaches critically can contribute to sensitising the workplace debate to a more capacious, theoretically nuanced reading of parliaments as more gender-sensitive, gender-inclusive, and gender-responsive representative institutions. In outlining the case for paying attention to the vernacular critically, we ask whether such an understanding can help to effectively bridge local and global understandings of parliaments as workplaces and institutionalise them. In studying professionalisation, we examine the paradox that professionalisation could lead to the depoliticisation of parliaments, which might affect the nature of gender-sensitivity that is being institutionalised. This analysis thus brings together institutional, postcolonial, and intersectional strands of work to think anew about gender-equal political practices in representative bodies.

Keywords

gender; Indian parliament; intersectional; parliaments; professional; vernacular; workplace

1. Introduction

Feminist institutionalists have pushed the paradigm of parliament as workplace as an essential “action area” towards creating and improving “gender-sensitive infrastructure and parliamentary culture” (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017, p. 16). This encompasses bringing workplace reforms that promote gender equality in the parliamentary arena, implementing which would make legislative spaces safer and more accessible for MPs, such as maternity leaves, childcare benefits, and protection (and recourse to justice and redressal) against workplace sexual harassment for legislators as well as parliamentary staff (Childs, 2016). In this article, we suggest that translating this paradigm globally, however, could be messy in practice. We follow two broad approaches to translating this framework from theory to practice—the vernacularisation and the professionalisation of parliaments—and expand on the dilemmas both lenses present with elucidating insights from the Indian parliament. This article is thus a theoretical exploration of the boundaries of the “parliament as workplace” framework.

Building on our theoretical work on parliaments as representative institutions, and empirical work on the Indian parliament, in this article we set out the following propositions as interventions in the debate on parliament as workplace. First, that we need intersectional analysis embedded in class, race, and caste inequalities that can shift over time through reflexive challenges to understand the gender dynamics of institutional configurations of power. Second, methodologically, we develop a more expansive gendered approach by applying a “politics and performance” framework (PPF) which pays attention to both representative politics of parliaments as well as its aesthetics. Third, that a critical vernacular approach to parliament as workplace can help to effectively bridge local and global understandings of gendered parliamentary reform. Finally, we suggest that the lens of professionalisation can provide us with useful insights towards studying gender-sensitive parliaments, although there are varying interpretations, manifestations, and unintended consequences to this framing in democratic systems across the world.

There is a considerable feminist literature that centres parliaments as gendered institutions and spaces (Childs, 2016; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Rai, 2010; Rai & Johnson, 2014; Rai & Spary, 2019; Sawer et al., 2006). Parliaments are representative in different ways—of populations/constituencies, of party programmes, but also of societal structure and power relations. They are also institutions that are internally organised and simultaneously shaped by the gendered and masculinist nature of external political organisations like political parties, which play an active role in fashioning how parliaments function (Childs & Murray, 2014; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). Parliaments around the world thus not only reflect gender inequality but also reproduce it (Palmieri, 2011, 2022; Rai, 2010). Women MPs negotiate parliamentary spaces often as “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004), as they navigate and perform their plural representational roles (Rai & Spary, 2019). The push for gender-sensitive parliaments has gained momentum over the decades, building on foundational interventions by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Palmieri, 2011), to have become a “truly global political phenomenon” today (Childs & Palmieri, 2023, p. 174), with feminist institutionalist scholars outlining ways in which reforms can be effected transnationally. Within this scholarship, one recent intervention has been to suggest that framing parliaments as workplaces can help us institutionalise gender-sensitivity and reform in parliaments (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Erikson & Verge, 2022). This paradigm has been useful in bridging scholarship with practice (Childs, 2016; Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017; Palmieri, 2011). In this article, we build on this scholarship and this paradigm, and ask how translatable this framework is across different parliamentary contexts, and what is

lost in translation. We map the complexities encountered in the transfer and application of the idea of “gendered parliamentary workplace” and suggest that scholarship focused on analyses of cases largely from the Global North cannot capture this complexity. This complexity is only exacerbated by the exceptionality of the parliament as a workplace.

We suggest that the enhancement of the parliament as workplace paradigm with PPF can better capture essential aspects of parliamentary politics in practice across gendered institutional cultures and allows for more critical approaches to the professionalisation of parliaments and the vernacularisation of parliamentary reform.

2. Politics and Performance: A Methodology to Study Workplaces

The exceptionality of parliament and parliamentary life can be seen not only in issues of representation, immunity, and longevity, but also in the fact that compared to other governance institutions, it is also more visibly performative. Like other institutions, parliaments make a claim—a representative claim (Saward, 2006)—which we can study through what Rai has called a “politics and performance framework” (PPF; Rai, 2014). Rai has developed this framework through her engagement with the Indian parliament and her work on gendered ceremony and ritual over two decades (Rai, 2010, 2014; Rai & Spary, 2019, 2022)—grounded in ethnographic analysis, interviews, and archival work. The first author of the current article is writing her doctoral thesis on the legal and political performances related to political parties in India and has interviewed MPs, political party leaders, lawyers representing political parties, as well as democratic activists dealing with the Indian party system. PPF allows us to make visible how institutions perform the rules and norms that they are governed by through paying attention to the embodied nature of representation, viewing the institution as a set of rules but also a space/stage through and on which somatic norms are established, performed, reproduced, and challenged. It also helps us focus on voice—an important element of representative theory—not only in terms of electoral representation but also in terms of speech acts, vocabularies, and timbre which is more or less easily understood and received, alongside labour involved in learning and producing performances. The latter is important as those who are “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004) in an institutional matrix have to labour much harder to navigate their ways through organisational spaces.

Because they are socially embedded, political performances can be either consolidative or challenging of institutional norms, and they can be individual or collective, and “smooth”/felicitous such that they are readily accepted as legitimate or not (Rai, 2015; Saward, 2010, pp. 35–56). Given the diversity of audience for parliamentary performances—MPs, party leaders and members, constituents, and the voting public—performances can be seen as complex and liminal; they can be disrupted, challenged through counter-performances, or accepted and appreciated. If we treat parliaments as workplaces, then analysing these performances through PPF can help us understand how the exceptionalism of parliament interacts with gendered experiences in and of parliaments. Finally, PPF insists on a historical and contextual approach to studying gendered politics—the long histories of colonialism, settler colonialism, capitalism, and state interventions all shape institutional development, and attention to these can be read through the performances of MPs, the rules they are governed by, and the scripts that they promote—both verbally and aesthetically, through ceremonies and rituals, and how these are interpreted. As we also show below, the PPF lens can help us understand our arguments about vernacularisation and professionalisation, about intersectionality and depoliticisation critically.

In the next sub-section, we briefly outline the institutional structure of the Indian parliament. The Indian parliament is the product of a long history of national struggle to gain independence from British rule. However, its roots are also embedded in the colonial governance of dissent. The Council of States that was envisaged by the British colonial government was a response to the growing demands for representation by the Indian national movement. At the time of independence, the representative system favoured by the postcolonial state reflects the entangled political history of colonialism—despite some calls to find a different system, the familiarity of the Westminster system meant that the Indian parliament was framed as a parliamentary institution based on a bi-cameral, first-past-the-post representation, with opposing political parties competing in the electoral field every five years (Rai & Spary, 2019, pp. 29–59). We map the plural and dynamic workplaces within the Indian parliament to show that the workplace framework needs to expand to take on board not only the frontstage—the Chambers and the Committees, for example—but also the backstage of parliamentary institutions. We think through how this affects our understanding of parliament as a workplace.

2.1. Parliamentary Workplaces and Workstages

It is important to note that, even as the emerging scholarship on the parliamentary workplace focuses primarily on MPs, the parliament as a workplace is heterogenous and includes several other groups of actors/workers (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Krook, 2018; Palmieri, 2011). The parliament cannot be framed as a workplace sufficiently without taking into account the institutional position of the MP as a “worker” in a legal context of a particular parliament, the institutional and financial relationship between political parties and their MPs in specific parliaments, and the relationship between MPs, political parties, parliamentary secretariats, and the employees who work in MPs’ offices, for example. Thus, the MP does not remain only a worker, but also is often an employer. Based on our reading of workplaces in the Indian parliament, we see the following interlocking and overlapping spaces in parliament that need to be considered within the workplace framework. We have visualised this as a map of the parliamentary workplaces of an MP in India in Figure 1.

Through this visualisation of parliamentary spaces/stages, we suggest that cohesive gender reform in parliamentary workspaces would require including these groups of actors within the fold of the “parliamentary workplace.” Our study of political parties, parliamentary training units, and parliamentary bureaucracy shows how these interconnected “backstages” are as important as the “frontstage” of parliamentary chambers, where MPs are the primary actors. An intersectional approach to the parliament as a workplace would also map the overlaps, tensions, and interchange (of power, resources, perceptions of gender, and institutional hierarchies) across these different groups. Even as we keep MPs at the centre of the analysis/gendered reform, mapping the overlaps of these multiple and simultaneous workspaces/workplaces/workstages within and in relation to which women MPs operate opens different territories of potential “reform.”

A rudimentary mapping of the different overlapping and interlocking workplaces reflects the key elements that need to be factored in to understand the gendered workplace and how the institutional processes must be reimaged and refashioned considering intersectional gender equality. Class, caste, race, and sexuality all come into play across these gendered spaces, modes of interactions, and liminal performances. Such a mapping also locates parliamentary processes within the shifts and overlaps in parliamentary workplaces. The sources of funding and resources across these overlapping workplaces also shift over time, adding layers

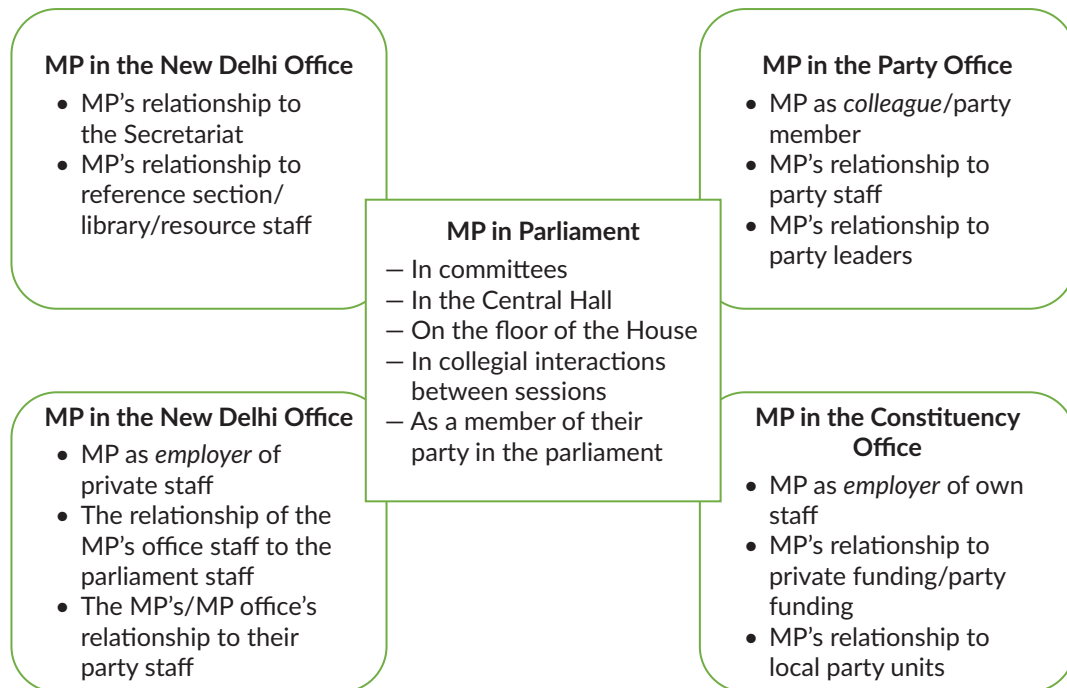


Figure 1. Mapping the parliamentary workplaces of an MP in India.

of complexities that must be taken account in formulating context-specific gender-sensitive and “diversity sensitive” (Childs, 2016) reforms in parliaments (see Figure 1).

We therefore must consider what the boundaries of the parliamentary workplace are. The parliamentary workplace is dynamic and plural; its boundaries are porous. In India, MPs are provided with allowances for staff and personnel in their MP flats and offices in New Delhi, but can also choose to hire personal staff directly from their own resources. Additionally, MPs, especially MPs from the Lok Sabha who are directly elected, maintain privately funded constituency offices. In practical terms, the MP's workplace in India extends not just to their office spaces in New Delhi, but to their constituency offices across the country and indeed their homes, where they also meet their constituents, journalists, lobbyists, and researchers (interview with former All Indian Trinamool Congress MP 2, April 22, 2023; see also Crewe & Sarra, 2021; Rai & Spary, 2019). Given gendered patterns of party leadership, these resources are unequally distributed, affecting the work of MPs—women and men—differently. How we understand the boundaries of the parliamentary workplace would be reflected in how we design gender-based and intersectional reforms, as well as who we hold accountable for them. Additionally, MPs are colleagues in party offices, within chambers of parliamentary committees, in common spaces like the erstwhile Indian parliament building's Central Hall, as well as on the House floor, but the registers of collegiality (and therefore the grammar of the workplace) are different on each work-stage (see Figure 1). Each of these spaces is gendered: as we discuss below with reference to debates and disruptions in the “frontstage” parliamentary workplace.

If debating is an important frontstage aspect of the MP's work in parliament, then it would be pertinent to ask how this can be made more equally accessible to both women and men. Parliamentary rules in India frame selection to speak at “question hour” and some debates through a lottery system; however, the party leaders have a big say in the selection of speakers. A woman MP said:

The way the system works is [based on] certain instruments in the Parliament procedure which depends on your party leadership, how they decide and whether they'll give you an opportunity. There are a lot of political considerations also on who's going to say what. (Rai & Spary, 2019, p. 181)

So, political parties play a critical backstage role in who performs on the frontstage in parliamentary debates and will therefore need to be included in our understanding of how parliamentary workplace is made gender equal.

These complexities of the parliamentary space are also compounded when seen intersectionally: India, like most other countries, presents a complicated multilingual, multi-ethnic landscape, where is there also an in-built hierarchy of linguistic and socio-political hegemonies that shape the way Indian (also representative) politics plays out on the ground, in terms of voting demographics, constituency delimitations, etc. Within this landscape, women MPs negotiate multiple performances: With party whips and their political parties more broadly, they negotiate their legislative participation on the floor of the House on chosen policy issues and in parliamentary committees, but women also negotiate their legislative independence and autonomy when structuring their own offices (Rai & Spary, 2019). They also do this in the context of a federal state where linguistic and regional differences shape political and policy debates, as do religious and caste affiliation.

Let us consider the example of disruption in parliaments, which can be seen both literally as a “disruption of parliamentary business and procedure” and figuratively “as a disruption of the rules and norms embedded within the ritual of parliamentary debate” (Spary et al., 2014, p. 182). While disruptions are regarded as aberrant events, very often political parties organise these disruptions quite advisedly. This could be to provide raucous support to the members speaking in debates or to drown out the voice of the opposition (Lovenduski, 2014; Spary et al., 2014). In our study of the Indian parliament, we found that while some women MPs, many of whom came to parliament through participation in social movements, thrived on the chaos of disruptive acts in parliament and brought themselves to the notice of their party leaders, others, more middle-class women who were inducted in parliament without necessarily experiencing the hurly-burly of grassroots politics, felt obligated to participate in disruptive acts because of their party's strategy, but were uncomfortable in doing so (Rai & Spary, 2019, pp. 303–304; more on disruptions below). Political parties are then critical in reforming (or not) parliament as a workplace.

While it is important to work towards workplace reform for a gender-sensitive parliament, our approach reveals that institutional initiatives such as maternity benefits and protection from harassment in the workplace do not capture the whole picture; change towards a gender-sensitive parliament would need to take into account the exceptionality of parliament and its plural workplaces. This presents us with a potential to reimagine and expand the framework of the parliamentary workplace. Here, we ask: what would the application of the workplace framework across different parliaments look like? What relevance does the approach have in parliamentary contexts in the Global South? What, in particular, should we be mindful of, in translating global feminist institutional paradigms like the workplace framework to local contexts? We locate two broad approaches or lenses through which this translation of reform could be undertaken; both are complex. First, vernacularisation provides the “parliament as workplace” framework with necessary local contextualisation but does not always lead to the provincialisation of global frameworks, leaving “translations” in one direction—from the global to the local. The second lens, that of professionalisation,

drives towards a structured set of parliamentary workplace reforms but runs the risk of sanitising radical legislative politics.

In the following two sections, we look at both these lenses and the dilemmas they pose. We map how a critical approach to vernacularisation and professionalisation might help navigate these dilemmas in the context of the framing of parliament as a gendered workplace.

3. Gender-Sensitive Parliament: Tensions of Vernacularisation

We suggest that the Inter-Parliamentary Union's template needs to be vernacularised to understand parliaments in the majority of the world, like India's. Vernacularisation has largely been attached to understanding the circulation of institutional knowledges through the efforts of vernacularisers who "translate" global discourse, policy frameworks, and institutional strategies to "local" contexts (Levitt, 2020; Levitt & Merry, 2009). Levitt outlines vernacularisation through four lenses: positionality, which relates to the embeddedness of vernacularisers in the global cultural hierarchy; translation to make something comprehensible, appropriate, and useful; aspirations to make and remake meanings that can transform the "stuff" of policy and its assemblages; and, finally, "the ways in which these factors change over time as policies come to ground, are modified, and circulate once again" (Levitt, 2020, p. 756). Vernacularisation, in the context of democratic institutions, has also been used by anthropologists to understand how democratic values and practices legitimise political institutions or not—taking the focus away from institutions to "practices and ideas of the local people" (Michelutti, 2007, p. 639). The "vernacular," therefore, "provides a line of inquiry to understand the rise of popular politics in different parts of the world" (Michelutti, 2007, p. 639), challenging a single model of Western democracy and the irrelevance of postcolonial forms of democratic practice (Spencer, 2007).

However, as Madhok (2021) has noted, vernacularisation cannot simply be read as a process of translation and circulation of policies facilitated by some (often elite) vernacularisers, but as one that challenges epistemic hierarchies and demands a "non-linear, intersectional and materially informed thinking arising from historically and politically specific struggles around world-making taking place in different locations, while also accounting for the transnational power dynamics in which these operate" (p. 20). It is in this latter sense that we use the term in this article. Democracy or democratic institutions are not then pale imitations of Western ideas and institutional norms; rather framed by indigenous as well as colonial histories, local customs, ceremonies and rituals, and social hierarchies, they can generate various modes and political practices recognisable to and legitimate in the eyes of the local people/audience (Apter, 2006; Michelutti, 2007; Rai, 2010), while at the same time sedimenting deep inequalities through this process. Attending to both these aspects of the vernacular is important. Challenging settled understandings of institutional processes, actors, and performances in the specific contexts of intersectional inequalities, we discuss this below through a presentation of disruptions in/of parliament.

Critical vernacularisation, then, allows us to contextualise the global expectations from a gender-sensitive parliament in relation to structural and institutional barriers on the ground. Second, it allows us to complicate and pluralise the "workplaces" within a parliament. A critical vernacularisation approach therefore helps us ask different questions arising from our study of the Indian parliament as a workplace. These questions emerge from studying a long, gendered history of parliament in postcolonial India, the changing political

landscape of the country, and its institutional functioning. A vernacularisation approach also addresses some gaps in the “parliament as workplace” literature. Our contention is that vernacularisation can challenge the hierarchies of epistemic relations between scholars working within the Western traditions and those that are not. This is not to reify “culture” or traditions, both of which are contested and often problematic concepts; rather, it is to understand the changing political processes of democratic translations of institutional workings, the discourses that surround these, the contradictions that emerge in doing so, and how these affect the development of concepts, modalities, and practices in both directions.

The bureaucratic and structural demands of ideal workplace reform in a gender-sensitive parliament would include, for example, maternity benefits and parental leave (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017), and protection from workplace harassment on the basis of gender. There is a continuing legal debate on the extent to which Indian MPs (and members of state legislative assemblies) are considered to be “public servants” (“SC dismisses plea,” 2019; Upadhyay & Singhvi, 2018). While legislative representatives in India are understood as public servants under the definition provided by the Prevention of Corruption Act of 1988 as the court has reiterated through benchmark cases like *P. V. Narsimha Rao v. State (Cbi/Spe)* (1998), there is still an on-going debate on the legal categorisation of an MP’s “work.” Dismissing recent petitions filed with it, the Supreme Court of India has stated that being an MP is not a “full-time” employment in India (Upadhyay & Singhvi, 2018). A petition sought to ban MPs from practising as lawyers (advocates) while holding seats in the Indian parliament, but the Government of India submitted that MPs serve their constituencies as elected members, not as employees of the government. While the contents of the petition are less significant to this discussion, it does pertain directly to the question at hand: If MPs are not employees, then rights and protections guaranteed to employees of organisations under Indian laws also do not cover them. This points to the exceptionality of parliaments as workplaces and needs to be considered if we wish to change rules and laws to protect those who work within parliament.

Critical vernacularisation thus points us towards the need to map the entanglement of many workplaces and many types of employers and employees/public servants, and the relations among them that make up the parliamentary workspace, when contextualising reform within specific institutional set-ups. But more importantly, critical vernacularisation would require us to account for not just the legal particularities of the MP’s position, but also crucially, for the normative discourse surrounding becoming an MP in Indian representative politics. In our interviews with current and former MPs as well as members of state legislative assemblies in India, the narrative of politics as “not a job but a form of social service” recurs (interview with All Indian Trinamool Congress MP 1, September 13, 2022; Bharatiya Janata Party MP 1, August 29, 2022; Indian National Congress MP 1, April 19, 2023; see also Rai & Spary, 2019). The trope of service/vocation is a deeply gendered one and aligns with the place of many women in the home. While women MPs use this term to create more political space for themselves (Rai & Spary, 2019), this also affects their place in parliament and party as leaders (Rai & Spary, 2019). What political negotiations in terms of shifting performances of representation does this require from Indian MPs—women MPs in particular—who interact with demands for gender-equal reforms in parliaments? This concern aligns further with the larger, gendered political culture in India, where significant female political leaders are referred to in public and popular discourse with monikers of familial endearment (and implied entitlement)—just as West Bengal’s Chief Minister (and erstwhile MP) Mamata Banerjee is known as “*didi*” (elder sister), Dalit political leader and erstwhile Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, is known as “*Behen ji*” (respected sister), the late Jayalalitha, once Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, was known as “*Amma*” (mother; Ray Chaudhury, 2022,

p. 946), and Sumitra Mahajan, who was one of the longest-serving woman MPs in India and an erstwhile Speaker of the Lok Sabha, is known as “*Tai*” (older sister in Marathi; Chadha, 2018; see also Banerjee, 2022). The politics of familial culture in South Asia implicates these monikers in expectations of care and service on the one hand (Ray Chaudhury, 2022, p. 957), and, on the other, it also produces a public political space for women politicians to function in familial relational terms. A critical vernacular lens into the Indian parliamentary workplace would allow us to move beyond simply locating the extent to which institutional reforms can be brought about, and towards unpacking the nuanced, gendered implications of language that encompasses relational modes of public “work” for the Indian woman parliamentarian. This would expand the ambit of the workplace framework—for example, by bringing in the language the media uses to describe the work and place of MPs—and its use in legislative studies.

4. Between Professionalisation and Privileges: Rethinking the Parliamentary Workplace

The “parliament as workplace” framework indicates normative reform pushing in the direction of a more “professional” parliament. In translating the “parliamentary workplace” approach from academic theorising into practice, feminist institutionalist practitioners have to turn to modes of professionalisation (Childs, 2016). But what work does conceptualising professionalisation do for understanding parliament as a workplace? The professionalisation of an MP’s position within a workplace might make us examine issues such as parliamentary attendance, speaking in debates, and putting forward parliamentary motions and bills. In translating global norms of institutional reform, professionalisation would allow us to focus on improving the workings of existing institutions such as parliamentary committees or the speaker’s office to function in a gender-sensitive way. Professionalisation, of course, has a value for institutions.

In the Indian parliament, the conduct of MPs in relation to parliamentary matters is governed by the Ethics Committee and the parliamentary Rules of Procedure. The key actors mediating MPs’ immunities, privileges, and their conduct are the speaker in the Lok Sabha and the chairperson in the Rajya Sabha. The current ruling Hindu right-wing majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party government in India has attempted in recent years to curb the speech of several political leaders in the opposition, both inside and outside the parliament (Sahu, 2023). In one of the key instances of such curbing in the last year, Rahul Gandhi, one of the chief voices in the opposition, was disqualified from the Lok Sabha (and subsequently reinstated following a Supreme Court order) on an arguably dubious charge of defamation brought for a speech made outside the parliament (“Rahul Gandhi disqualified,” 2023). In 2023, Mahua Moitra, a woman MP noted for her vocal opposition to the ruling government in parliamentary debates, was expelled from the parliament after a perfunctory Ethics Committee investigation into allegations of Moitra allowing third-party benefactors access to her parliament accounts to pose questions in the Lok Sabha on her behalf. She alleged that the questioning by the Ethics Committee was sexist and derogatory (“Ethics panel report,” 2023). In recent years, the Indian parliament has faced controversies regarding the usage of rules of “unparliamentary conduct” to expunge the speeches of opposition MPs who have spoken about corruption charges on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, with its Lok Sabha speaker, Om Birla, claiming that such disruption “erodes democracy” (“Unparliamentary conduct, undesirable words,” 2023). All this would easily come under the ambit of reform through professionalisation—where the entanglements between the ruling party in government and parliamentary institutions would be made more transparent, robust, and gender-sensitive. However, professionalisation is a Janus-faced concept.

Below, using four particular aspects of parliamentary politics, we discuss how professionalisation can also lead to institutionalising deeply gendered norms, vocabularies, and performances.

4.1. *Immunity/Impunity*

While it is ostensibly necessary for a more gender-sensitive parliament with structures of redress built into it, in democracies like India where there have been increasing fears of backslides and institutional weakening (Varshney, 2022), increased technocracy in parliamentary workspaces brings in a looming danger of co-option. MPs in the Indian parliament, like most parliaments, enjoy immunity from prosecution for utterances within the parliament, as well as sanctuary from criminal prosecution while they are within parliamentary premises (Constitution of India, 1950, Article 105). However, in some countries like Germany, for example, members of the Bundestag (akin to the Lower House or the Lok Sabha in India) enjoy legislative immunity for utterances inside the parliament, but not for anything said that may be construed as a defamatory utterance (Deutscher Bundestag, n.d., p. 3). This exception is not guaranteed in India. Parliamentary immunity in India (extended also to state legislatures and assemblies) has often meant impunity not only for misogynist and sexist remarks (Amnesty International UK, 2020; Rai & Spary, 2019, 2022), but also for making remarks that would be considered incendiary speech against religious and ethnic groups outside the parliament. In 2023, Bharatiya Janata Party MP Ramesh Bidhuri's action within the House was brought under the investigation of the Committee of Privileges after he called Danish Ali, a Muslim MP, a "mullah terrorist," 'pimp' and 'katwa,' a slur used for circumcised Muslims" ("Ramesh Bidhuri skips appearing," 2023) but faced little to no punitive consequences. This tension between immunity and impunity is increasingly a debate across global legislatures (Kwaw, 2021). The professionalisation of parliaments would seemingly redress this and create a more equal workplace environment, but as the instances of curbing the voices of the opposition cited above show, uncritical professionalisation could run the risk of allowing further democratic decline.

4.2. *Women's Reservation*

Similarly, professionalisation of parliaments, if not adequately vernacularised, could run the risk of de-democratisation of parliaments. Take this example: In September 2023, the Indian parliament passed a legislation, after nearly three decades of debate and political deadlocks, mandating that one-third of seats at the parliament and state assemblies will be reserved for women. The passing of this legislation presents an opportunity to assess how an increased representation of women in parliament might be generative of debate and potential reform to make the Indian parliament a more gender-sensitive institution, which then may be professionalised. However, both the process of introducing and passing this historic legislation—"shrouded in secrecy" till the last moment, as an MP argued in her speech during the legislative debate (CNBC-TV18, 2023)—and the details of its planned implementation, after an indeterminate time, cast doubt on the current government's gender awareness and on gender equality in Indian politics and in the Indian parliament more broadly. As we have argued elsewhere (see Banerjee & Rai, 2023), to expand women's membership of parliament and at the same time weaken the institution itself is problematic. Also, contradictory is the gendered approach taken here—on the one hand, eventually expanding the representation of women in parliament, but also taking it so non-seriously as an issue that no consultation with women's groups, women MPs, or opposition parties was deemed necessary. This Act became a purely performative gesture in the Hinduised choreography of opening the new parliament building (see Banerjee & Rai, 2023).

4.3. Training

Vernacularising professionalisation would require critical interrogation of existing legislative “training” systems in specific parliaments. In India, for example, it would necessitate a critical analysis of the system of professionalisation set up within the Indian parliament, i.e., the secretariat, and within it, the Parliamentary Research and Training Institute for Democracies (PRIDE), and their relationship with both MPs and political parties. The PRIDE, earlier known as the Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training, comes under the purview of the Lok Sabha secretariat, and carries out training and capacity-building programmes on “parliamentary processes and procedures” that cater to bureaucrats (at both national and state levels), for officers of the Lok Sabha secretariat themselves, and also for newly elected members of (state) legislative assemblies and MPs (“Pride newsletter second edition,” 2021, p. 3). PRIDE boasts of the training programmes it hosts for MPs and officials from parliamentary secretariats and ministries from various countries (“Pride newsletter second edition,” 2021) and positions the Indian parliament as a case for global emulation. However, there are no structured programmes under PRIDE for gender-sensitivity in parliamentary proceedings. Following our mapping of workstages within the parliamentary workplace (see Figure 1), the secretariat and the MPs function not just in plural workplaces within the parliament, but are enmeshed with each other in complex, dynamic ways. In our narrative interviews with parliamentarians, a woman MP noted a critical difference between working as an MP on the House floor and within parliamentary committee chambers:

When you are in the committee you have the support of bureaucrats...when they are on your side you can, according to your needs, manage them, in order to facilitate policy implementation at the district level, at the block level...When you step out of the committee and into the floor as a parliamentarian, the bureaucrats don't listen to you. (interview with former Bahujan Samaj Party MP 1, August 19, 2022)

A critical assessment of such professionalisation measures would allow a mapping of overlapping, plural parliamentary workplaces, and necessitate conversations on the relationship between MPs, different political parties, and the parliament secretariat.

4.4. Disruptions

The boundaries of professionalism are translated differently in different parliamentary cultures. Similar to the overarching parliamentary workplace paradigm, moves towards professionalisation also come with ideal institutional imaginations of order. Overlapping with our arguments on vernacularisation, therefore, any efforts at professionalising the parliament to be more gender-sensitive and equal would need to consider the democratic power of disruptions and protests in the parliament (and the complexities of inter and intra-party collaborations that play a role in them; Rai & Spary, 2022; Spary et al., 2014). As non-elite groups increase in representation in parliament, the norms of performance in debates, in committees, and around the parliamentary spaces change over time (Rai, 2015). If the parliamentary workplace paradigm remains tied to rigid norms of behaviour attached to professionalisation, we run the risk of creating binaries of representative and unrepresentative parliaments. Systems of rules and procedures in parliaments might be used instrumentally to mask or push back against critiques of the hollowing out of the powers of parliaments to hold governments democratically accountable. For example, the rhetoric of “disruptive behaviour” was

instrumentalised against 141 opposition MPs protesting against the Bharatiya Janata Party government as a reason to suspend them during the Winter Session in 2022 (“Parliament winter session,” 2023).

A “performance and politics” lens to study the practices in the Indian parliament can allow us to engage with the democratic power of disruptions and protests differently. An uncritical approach to professionalisation might lead to depoliticising gender-sensitive institutional reforms of the parliamentary workplace, for example, disciplining all parliamentary disruptive performances; a critical engagement with professionalisation, however, allows us to see these moments as an acknowledgement of different modes of communication of non-elite MPs (Spary & Garimella, 2013). More importantly, it allows us to map the representative expectations from MPs and the claims they make by visibilising, embodying, and performing their protest within the parliament (Spary et al., 2014) as a democratic workstage and workplace. Professionalisation of parliaments towards becoming more intersectionally gender-sensitive institutions is thus important. Feminist institutionalist practitioners/scholars therefore need to be wary of an uncritical institutional push towards the professionalisation of parliaments which could run the risk of executive co-option.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to build on the “parliament as a workplace” literature and tried to expand its remit by introducing the concepts of critical vernacularisation and professionalisation by methodologically deploying PPF. This has allowed us to open up the debate by showing the entanglements between the front- and backstages of parliament, particularly the role of political parties.

Our purpose in writing this article is not to deny the importance of the workplace framework; undoubtedly, reform of the parliamentary workday, provision of creches, implementation of legal penalties for sexual harassment, and gender-sensitive trainings are crucial for a sustainable parliamentary infrastructure. Rather, we wish to explore how this framework can be used in the context of this exceptional representative institution. We argue that this exceptionality needs to be celebrated as well as regulated and reformed. This consideration, therefore, of parliaments as workplaces, through critical approaches and the challenges they present, allows us to complicate what is not provincialised and what is vernacularised, as the discourse of “gender-sensitive parliaments,” articulated in “other” Global North contexts becomes globalised through international institutions such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union. It helps us ask to what extent global norms and frameworks that are dominated by the Global North discourses can be translated into specific contexts, and what we would need to consider in order to effectively vernacularise practices.

We suggest that gender reforms in parliaments as workspaces should thus take into consideration, first, the institutional DNA that makes up particular parliaments, and, second, how institutions function (messily) in practice, where the arbitrary boundaries of workplaces do not hold neatly. This perspective is central to long-term, sustainable reforms to make parliaments gender-sensitive workplaces. Gender-sensitivity in the parliamentary workplace, thus, cannot be seen or designed for reform in isolation from the complex dynamics of the heterogeneous workstages that make up the parliament. Thinking more broadly and deeply about the framing of the “workplace” as a performative, plural space, and bringing more attention to the “workplace” in the “gender-equal parliamentary workplace reform” discourse would therefore allow us to frame effective reforms in these workplace cultures which govern not just the election of women MPs but

the long-term sustainability of women's participation in the Indian parliament (Rai & Spary, 2019). While we have explored this with the Indian example here, we suggest that a similar critical exercise across different legislative contexts would render useful comparative maps of parliamentary workplaces globally. It also allows for the potential in the "parliamentary workplace" not just as a strategic paradigm to adopt for immediate goals of reform such as gender-sensitive rights and benefits for MPs, but also as a potent metaphor that can enrich scholarly enquiries for wider use in legislative studies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data used in this article contains excerpts from transcripts of anonymised fieldwork interviews, translated into English. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, and in accordance with the informed consent granted by the participants, data supporting this study cannot be made available.

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