

# Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments

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## Abstract

Gender equality reforms implemented across various parliaments around the world have diversified. Introducing the thematic issue Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments, we trace the context of making parliamentary institutions more gender-sensitive. We highlight both international organizations’ top-down efforts and grassroots movements’ bottom-up approaches and emphasize the complexities of descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. We argue that next to the broader setting, feminist institutionalism provided a critical lens to examine these relationships while acknowledging the need for gender-sensitive parliaments that prioritize gender equality. We illuminate contributions from both the Global South and North and pay particular attention to “extraordinary cases” as well as methodological, theoretical, and conceptual innovations, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in institutionalizing gender equality in diverse political contexts.

## Keywords

critical actors; gender equality; gender-sensitive parliaments; governments; parliaments; policy reform; political parties; political representation; procedural reform

## 1. Introduction

The scope of gender equality reforms implemented across various parliaments around the world has diversified. International organizations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the OSCE, or the European Institute for Gender Equality have played an essential, if top-down, role in promoting and diffusing gender equality norms in political institutions, particularly in parliaments, the core topic of this thematic issue. In parallel and sometimes in partnership, women’s

organizations worked from the bottom up at regional, national, and transnational levels to push for gender equality, often from a more intersectional angle.

In extant research, women's representation and particularly electoral quotas have captured significant attention (Baker, 2019; Dahlerup, 2006; Franceschet et al., 2012; Krook, 2009; Lang et al., 2022; Rubio-Marín & Lépinard, 2018), across multiple regions. With systemic tracking of the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments over the past three decades, a spotlight has been cast on the progress and setbacks made at the national, regional, and international levels. Research has drawn connections between the presence of women (descriptive representation) and their specific contribution to policy and procedures considered by these institutions (substantive representation; see, for instance, Catalano Weeks, 2022). When women are present they raise new policy agendas and consider old agendas from new perspectives and they embody new role models for others, including young and gender-diverse people (symbolic representation; Lombardo & Meier, 2014; Verge, 2022a, 2022b).

Of course, the connections between descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation cannot—and should not—be oversimplified, although they are co-constitutional (Lombardo & Meier, 2019). Feminist institutionalism (FI; Kenny, 2007; Mackay, 2014; Waylen, 2017) has aimed to explore the complexities in these relationships, with a particular focus on the role of institutions in mitigating “gendered impact.” FI has provided a lens through which to broaden our inquiries about the gendered nature of the political institutions women participate in and lead (Chappell, 2006; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Lowndes, 2014).

Over time, our perspective has broadened from investigating representational aspects and gendered policy-making to the organizational environment and how it impacts gender (in)equality. Parliaments are increasingly encouraged to reconsider their internal processes, practices, and norms to become “gender-sensitive.” A gender-sensitive parliament is defined as one which “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” (Childs & Palmieri, 2023, p. 177). Achieving a gender-sensitive parliament requires substantive policy reform in a range of areas including working hours and cultures to improve work/life balance; work health and safety regimes to reduce gender-based harassment, intimidation, and assault; and work processes and outputs (e.g., legislation and policy) to normalise gender equality accountability mechanisms in the workplace (Childs, 2020; IPU, 2012, 2016; Palmieri, 2011, 2018, 2021). Importantly, reforms ought to relate equally to MPs and all those who engage with and contribute to the parliamentary ecosystem, including staff, political advisers, experts, and citizens.

Academic scholars are increasingly interested in the process by which these reforms are implemented, as well as their effectiveness and impact, resulting in a constantly growing field of research (Childs & Palmieri, 2023). Much of this academic research has been informed by collaborations between practitioners from international organizations and academics, delivering innovative output in the form of grey literature, or publications designed and managed by international organizations (cf., for some recent publications, Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024; Ashe, 2022; Childs & Palmieri, 2020; Palmieri, 2021; Smith, 2022). While this grey literature has served an important function in outlining good practice across parliaments, academic research has also proven useful in bringing a more critical lens to the development and effectiveness of these reforms, including, where required, a more critical consideration of the role of international organisations in this work.

Yet, there are still gaps in academic research. Particularly evident in the academic gender-sensitive parliaments literature to date is a focus on reforms initiated in the (Euro–American–Australasian) Global North rather than the Global South (Childs, 2016, 2020; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Palmieri & Baker, 2022), although there are important notable exceptions (Rai & Spary, 2019). This focus on developed, rather than developing, parliamentary institutions risks a more comprehensive analysis of the opportunities and drivers for change, as well as nuanced understandings of very different political contexts. In response, we editors organised a hybrid workshop, Gender and Parliament, in October 2023 at Tampere University, Finland, to address these challenges. We considered such a workshop a good way to introduce a diverse set of authors to each other across the globe, to allow an initial review in a relatively friendly format and to create coherence to the thematic issue by emphasising, in the discussion, the key themes and questions of gender-sensitive reforms.

## 2. Unity in Goals, Diversity in Approaches

In this thematic issue, we showcase research from colleagues in both the Global South and the Global North, and present “unusual suspects” as well as conceptual elaborations across the disciplines of political science, anthropology, sociology, and development studies.

The contributions to the thematic issue address important cross-cutting questions such as:

- Who are the critical actors that drive gender equality reforms in parliamentary institutions and to what extent do they rely on/mobilise supportive coalitions or networks for those reforms?
- How do local contexts—political, economic, and cultural—enable and/or resist gender equality reforms within parliamentary institutions?
- Which analytical and theoretical frameworks can contribute to a better understanding of changes across different contexts?

In answering these questions, authors uncovered extraordinary cases of reform in countries that are rarely the focus of gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms. Often hidden in international discussions because of the one-China policy, Taiwan is presented as a gender equality leader in Asia with an almost gender parity parliament. In her contribution, Huang (2024) outlines the continuing challenges—even in such a gender-friendly environment—to systematic parliamentary gender mainstreaming. She argues that while gender equality achievements have been driven by a strong women’s movement, political party elites have yet to prioritise and operationalise an institutional gender equality culture.

The role of autocratic regimes in introducing gender equality reforms is interrogated in depth by Lončar (2024). Loncar shows the contradictory, but politically expedient, way in which the autocratic regime in Serbia has adopted gender equality reforms while at the same time undermining their impact and fueling anti-gender sentiment. Similarly, Baker and Palmieri (2024) reflect on the autocratic nature of a former government in Fiji, which also oversaw the introduction of a gender mainstreaming mandate for parliamentary committees—designed by an international consultant—without significant local buy-in. Baker and Palmieri compare this process with a more localised contestation of an electoral gender quota designed by political elites in Samoa and significantly tested in the most recent election in 2021, which resulted in more women being elected. Considering the passage of the sexual crime bill in the parliament of Indonesia, Siregar and Prihatini (2024)

uncover both the role of men as critical actors in the legislative process and also a range of critical acts that ultimately secured its enactment. These included opportunities for dialogue and compromise on language, and the election of a new parliament that was more amenable to its passage.

Women MPs' political survival is brought to the fore in Espírito-Santo et al. (2024) discussion of parliamentary questions in South Africa. Exploring the relationship between gender and interparty competition, Espírito-Santo et al. find that women "maximize their career prospects" by asking parliamentary questions that are perceived to reflect "hard" policy domains rather than the so-called "women's issues," with implications for the substantive representation of women.

This thematic issue also digs deeper into those parliaments that have already been the subject of analysing gender-sensitive parliaments—notably, Sweden, the European Parliament, and Australia. Each of these articles, however, brings a new focus. Erikson and Josefsson (2024) draw our attention to the increasing threat posed by the radical right to longstanding norms of gender balance in political institutions in Sweden. With fascinating evidence of the difficulties experienced by MEPs in balancing work and family in an institution that is, for most, far from home, Frech and Kopsch (2024) find that the European Parliament needs to do more to move "beyond the rhetoric" of being a family-friendly parliament. Barr et al. (2024) present recently implemented wholesale gender equality reforms in the Australian parliament and point out the important role of external influencers—including feminists working in academic institutions—as essential drivers.

Besides these extraordinary cases and (contested) "role models," the thematic issue contributes to methodological, theoretical, and conceptual debates. Ahrens et al. (2024) discuss in their article the challenges of comparing parliaments operating in very different national contexts and offer a novel perspective for future comparative analyses. They suggest applying the "most significant change" approach (Davies & Dart, 2005) to collect through a bottom-up, inductive, and participatory approach "stories of significant change." The method proved valuable in incorporating practitioners' perspectives on crucial, even if sometimes singular, gender-sensitive changes and their societal broader impact.

Banerjee and Rai (2024) referencing the Indian parliament, expand on the fundamental importance of local ownership of gender-sensitive reforms. They innovate theoretical debates on gender-sensitive parliaments by combining institutional, postcolonial, and intersectional perspectives. Building on researching the Indian parliament, they bridge the gap between international and local understandings of gender-sensitive parliaments and introduce two new approaches—"vernacularisation" and "professionalisation." A vernacular approach uncovers the points at which international norms must be "translated" into local systems and cultures, while a professional approach sheds light on how local institutions perpetuate deeply gendered norms, vocabularies, and performances.

Childs (2024), scrutinizing her extensive work in the UK House of Commons and other parliamentary venues, conceptualizes the "feminist academic critical actor" by engaging with earlier concepts of "feminist critical actors" (Childs & Krook, 2006, 2008) and "feminist critical friends" (Chappell & Mackay, 2021). She emphasizes the "feminist academic critical actor's" role in instigating and instituting institutional change while acknowledging the potential costs of engagement, particularly for minoritized and/or precarious academics. Furthermore, she highlights the dual role of academics as both agents and analysts of change,

addressing the responsibilities, challenges, and potential harms they face in transforming masculinized parliamentary institutions.

In a comparable move, Barr et al. (2024) engage with gender-sensitive parliamentary change in Australia through an auto-ethnographic approach and explore the specific role of feminists in the academy as catalysts behind reforms. Extending Celis and Childs' (2020; see also Childs, 2024) conceptualizations of feminist academic critical actors, they provide a novel typology comprising four successful strategies for policy change through feminists in the academy, both as insiders, designing credible policies, and as outsiders, amplifying anonymous voices without risking their institutional reputation.

Ahrens and Meier (2024), finally, transfer the concept of gender-sensitive parliaments to parliamentary groups and discuss them as key actors in achieving a gender-sensitive parliament. They discuss how parliamentary groups can improve parliamentary functioning across four aspects: representation, policy-making, engagement with societal interests, and groups as gender-sensitive workplaces, and scrutinize these against the background of broader parliamentary and party contexts.

Next to methodological, conceptual, and theoretical contributions as well as the diverse cases, this thematic issue also presents a broad variety of topics, demonstrating the wealth of research on gender equality reforms in parliaments. Next to classical politics and gender topics like leadership, quotas, or parliamentary questions, the issue covers policy-making regarding gender-based violence, gender mainstreaming, and organizational aspects, such as parents in parliaments and parliamentary groups.

Moreover, the issue engages with a broad scope of electoral systems and their parliamentary institutions. Majority systems include the first-past-the-post system of India (Banerjee & Rai, 2024), Samoa (Baker & Palmieri, 2024), and the UK (Childs, 2024), and the alternative vote in Australia (Barr et al., 2024). Proportional systems are represented by the European Parliament (Frech & Kopsch, 2024), Fiji (Baker & Palmieri, 2024), Indonesia (Siregar & Prihatini, 2024), Serbia (Lončar, 2024), South Africa (Espírito-Santo et al., 2024), Sweden (Erikson & Josefsson, 2024). Moreover, Taiwan features a mixed system (Huang, 2024) and Ahrens and Meier (2024) engage with different systems when discussing gender-sensitive parliamentary groups.

Likewise, gender equality reforms occur in different political systems, including democratic and autocratic ones and the case of Taiwan, where statehood is contested within the one-China policy (Huang, 2024). Whether the gender equality reforms go beyond genderwashing (Lončar, 2024; see also Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022) and lead to sustainable transformations of parliaments into gender-equal workplaces requires further attention in future research.

Finally, as emphasised in the beginning, the articles cover both Global South and Global North countries, which leads to a more balanced picture of gender equality reforms on a global scale. All these varieties—topic, electoral, political systems, and geography—demonstrate the general compatibility of the concept of gender-sensitive parliaments independent of national or supranational context.

### 3. Conclusion

The articles in this thematic issue illustrate the wealth and diversity of gender equality reforms across different regions. They also demonstrate the challenges that occur, not least in settings where democracy is still or again contested. Overall, the broad range of reforms is striking given the worldwide increase in radical right and populist parties, anti-gender mobilizations, serious threats towards equality actors, and generally democratic backsliding (see, for instance, Bogaards & Petó, 2022; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018).

The contributors to this issue covered the important question of critical (feminist) actors that can drive gender equality reforms in parliamentary institutions and to what extent they relied on or mobilised supportive coalitions and networks for those reforms. As the articles show, change can be driven by external or internal actors or coalitions between them. By engaging with the actors, the articles also highlight the impact of local contexts (political, economic, and cultural), on which reforms are discussed and accepted, and which barriers need to be overcome to get reforms adopted. The empirical articles were framed by theoretical and conceptual contributions engaging with overarching questions of change agents, research approaches, intersectional aspects, and so far overlooked parliamentary actors.

Nevertheless, there are still many gaps to be closed, be it as activists, institutional equality actors, researchers, or any combination of these. Building on the case studies from different regions presented in this issue, future research should explore the lessons about institutional gender equality reforms: Which ones are universally shared and/or applied, or are they by nature, always localised? Likewise, parliaments are one but not the only important political institution and research could compare more closely what parliamentary institutions could learn from gender equality reforms in other political institutions or vice versa. Maintaining exchange between activists, institutional equality actors, and researchers across all political institutions promises to trigger additional reforms and to secure what has been accomplished so far.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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