Gender, Power and Privilege in the Parliamentary Workplace

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This introduction to the Special Section ‘Parliaments as workplaces: gendered approaches to the study of legislatures’ makes the case for revisiting the conditions under which male and female Members of Parliament (MPs) and staff carry out their parliamentary duties, thereby furthering the understanding of parliaments’ inner workings. It shows that adopting a workplace perspective grounded on feminist institutionalist analyses and gender organisational studies opens up new avenues for studying parliaments and the outcomes of political representation. The article then outlines how contributors to this Special Section deal with various aspects of the parliamentary workplace and concludes by highlighting the wider implications of this perspective for examining crucial questions of the parliamentary studies research agenda.

Keywords: Feminist Institutionalism, Gender, Informal Rules, Parliaments, Power, Workplace perspective

1. Introduction

Worldwide, gender inequality in the workplace is still pervasive with regards to access to opportunities, resources, influence and recognition for the duties carried out, even in female-dominated workplaces. The realm of politics (governments, legislatures, political parties, etc.) is also a workplace (cf. Dahlerup, 1988, p. 276) and does not escape from such inequality. While gender and politics scholars have long studied legislatures qua organisations, unveiling how the rules, structures, and outputs are riddled by ‘organizational masculinism’ (Lovenduski, 1998, p. 347), the characteristics and dynamics of the parliamentary workplace require further examination (Crawford and Pini, 2011; Wängnerud, 2015; Erikson and Josefsson, 2019a).
To date, knowledge is still limited with regards to working conditions in parliaments and whether and how such conditions vary across men and women MPs and staff members. On the one hand, aspects pertaining to the broader organisational culture of the institution have been generally studied disconnectedly, such as recruitment and promotion dynamics, opportunities to perform parliamentary duties with efficiency and efficacy, or the construction of identities and parliamentary practices through rituals and ceremonies. On the other hand, fundamental aspects of the parliamentary workplace remain largely understudied, including work-family arrangements, the recruitment of the parliamentary staff, and anti-harassment policies. Furthermore, there is a particular need to pay attention to the gendered outcomes of political representation produced in institutional settings characterised by a strongly masculinised organisational culture.

This article seeks to fill these gaps by revisiting the conditions under which male and female MPs and staff carry out their parliamentary duties. We argue that looking at parliaments through a gendered lens inevitably changes the way we conceive of and empirically examine this crucial institution of democracy. Research on the genderedness of the parliamentary workplace has the potential to illuminate dynamics that mainstream legislative studies have neglected, shedding new light on topics that are central to this political science sub-field, such as questions of legislative behaviour, the functioning and work of committees, or institutional design. Simultaneously, this perspective opens up new questions for the study of parliaments such as: Can parliaments be judged internally democratic if women continue to experience obstacles to performing their roles and duties as MPs or staff members? Can gender mainstreaming be effectively applied to legislative outputs if gender equality is not a key guiding principle across all parliamentary practices and processes?

Building on the scholarship on gender and political representation, particularly on feminist institutionalist analyses and on gender organisational studies, the following section discusses the interplay between gender and power in the parliamentary context. We move on to pinpoint what a workplace perspective adds to the understanding of the inner workings of parliaments and the outcomes of the representative process, contributing new questions to the study of parliaments. Next, we highlight its relevance for practitioner strategies to improve equality in legislative chambers, noting the importance of constant interplay between theory and practice. We then introduce the articles in this Special Section and outline how they deal with various aspects of the parliamentary workplace. We conclude by reflecting on the wider implications of this perspective for examining central questions of the parliamentary studies research agenda.
2. Gender and power in parliaments

While women’s numerical representation in parliaments has gradually increased in the last few decades thanks to the adoption of gender quotas, as of 1 January 2020 men still make up 75.1 per cent of the world’s MPs. Over 30 years ago, Dahlerup (1988, p. 279) identified several types of negative consequences for women of the skewed composition of political institutions such as: lack of legitimate authority and lower efficiency; exposure to stereotyping and double standards; role conflicts and double binds; exclusion from informal networks and power structures; lower promotion rate and higher dropout rate; discomfort with the organisational culture; and sexual harassment. These patterns of gender inequality are still pervasive in the parliaments of both the Global North and the Global South and are even found in legislative chambers that have almost reached gender parity in their composition.

As argued in institutional analyses that incorporate a gender perspective, women’s presence in political institutions disrupts male control and reveals hidden expectations (Puwar, 2004; Lovenduski, 2005, p. 147), but it does not, in itself, catalyse inevitable and irreversible change in the ways institutions work. Most crucially, feminist institutionalist analyses have enhanced our understanding of the ways in which socially and culturally constructed scripts about gender—i.e. about masculinity and femininity—‘are intertwined in the daily culture of an institution’, shaping participants’ experiences and sedimenting gender power relations (Kenney, 1996, p. 456). While power is thus articulated through gender (Scott, 1986, p. 45), gender power relations go beyond the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources or recognition; fundamentally, they speak of the institutionalised and thus taken-for-granted processes that shape the capacity to define the conditions for action. Therefore, gender operates not just as a social ‘category’ but also as a ‘process’ that causes structures and policies to have a differential impact upon women and men (Beckwith, 2005, p. 132).

Gendering processes in institutions—that is, the shaping of relations of inequality and power asymmetries and the marking of traits, roles or behaviour as masculine or feminine—take place through the inscription of gender in the formal and informal ‘rules of the game’ (Mackay et al., 2010; Chappell and Waylen, 2013). In this vein, the mechanisms through which political institutions distribute power in gendered ways—often in intersection with race, social class, sexuality, age or ableness—are found in the very same institutional arrangements and organisational cultures (Lowndes, 2020, p. 544). While formal rules are codified, informal rules, such as norms, practices, conventions and rituals are unwritten and their creation, communication and enforcement occur outside of officially

1See IPU’s world classification of women in national parliaments: https://data.ipu.org/women-averages
sanctioned channels (cf. Helmke and Levitsky, 2004, p. 727). Both formal and informal rules can be ‘about gender’ when roles, actions or benefits are differentially allocated to women and men in either negative (i.e. outright exclusions for women) or positive (i.e. gender quotas) ways. Rules may also be ‘apparently gender-neutral’ but, nonetheless, produce ‘gendered effects’ due to their interaction with wider social norms like the sexual division of labour and gender stereotypes. These two types of gendered rules lead to outcomes that favour men and men’s interests (Lowndes, 2020, p. 545).

Parliaments can be thus understood as gendered institutional spaces (Palmieri, 2019, p. 173), with gender ‘making’ parliaments and parliaments ‘making’ gender in multiple ways, as is also the case of other political institutions (Vickers, 2013) and political parties (Kenny and Verge, 2016). Given that ‘power, process and behaviour operate to favour the men who created them and were their sole occupants for so long’, parliaments have institutionalised sexism in their inner workings (Lovenduski, 2014, p. 16), which is likely to affect career patterns, influence capacity and agenda-setting possibilities and, more generally, work-related wellbeing. By shaping how power is circulated and reproduced, gender inevitably affects the performance in and of parliaments (Rai and Spary, 2019, p. 20). The patterns of advantage and disadvantage that gender power relations entail for male and female MPs, respectively, and the direct influence they have on political and policy outcomes can be illustrated with numerous examples.

Research on legislative initiatives in the United States Congress shows that women MPs are often marginalised in bill sponsorship (Schwindt-Bayer, 2006) and that their bills are subject to more hostile witness testimony and longer discussions (Kathlene, 1994). Roll-call voting studies have attributed gender differences to the unequal amount and type of legislative resources held by men and women MPs in this legislature (Norton, 1995). Greater obstacles for women MPs’ bill sponsorship have also been identified in the Chilean parliament due to their lack of leadership positions in parliament and of influential allies in the executive (Franceschet, 2010). Likewise, studies on parliamentary speech-making in the Swedish and British lower houses have found gender biases in the selection of MPs who take the floor on ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ issues and female MPs frequently find their issue-focussed discussions turned into person-focussed confrontations (Bäck et al., 2014; Ilie, 2013). Scholars have also noted that a feminised style of doing politics is regarded as being less legitimate and less effective, putting pressure on women MPs to conform to the traditional (male) norms of the house (Childs, 2004). It is thus unsurprising that female MPs declare themselves to be subject to more negative treatment and to experience higher levels of anxiety (Erikson and Josefsson, 2019a).

Such examples reveal the widespread operation of informal rules on masculinity and femininity that maintain the asymmetry of institutional power relations.
On the one hand, masculinised norms of confrontation, like adversarial (male-ordered macho) styles of debate, speaking in a loud and strong voice, and using demonstrative gestures, tend to alienate women MPs (Franceschet, 2010, p. 402; Verge and de la Fuente, 2014, p. 71). Conversely, male MPs who perform this behaviour ‘can blend in and take advantage of their legitimacy as the norm’ (Galea and Gaweda, 2018, p. 278). On the other hand, gender appropriateness criteria imbue the distribution of roles, with more men being appointed to the most visible and prestigious leadership positions (vertical segregation), and the distribution of roles and domain areas (horizontal segregation), with gender marking informing the assignment of male and female MPs to committees of dissimilar social value (Crawford and Pini, 2011, p. 90; see also, among others, Heath et al., 2005). Furthermore, women politicians who access high-level positions are sometimes dishonoured with rumours about sexual favours to their male selector (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014, p. 73).

Apparently, gender-neutral rules may also sustain privilege or lack thereof due to their gendered effects. For instance, the fallacy of the gender-less representative who has no care responsibilities underpins formal rules about the sitting time of committee and plenary sessions, which is also reflected on the limited work-family policies parliaments have adopted (e.g. parental leave options, proxy voting, regulation of working hours or child-care facilities). Besides sustaining ‘the male politician norm’ (Campbell and Childs, 2014, p. 491), these rules subordinate the working conditions of the parliamentary staff to those of MPs, as late-hour parliamentary work also affects clerks, assistants or ushers. Likewise, informal rules about being a good colleague, entailing ‘working long hours and “being seen” in parliamentary bars or clubs’, allow those individuals who are not the primary caregivers a higher chance to meet such standards and participate in informal networking (Lowndes, 2020, p. 546).

Additionally, infrastructure is not gender-neutral. Access to networks and chances to cut deals is unequal when men’s restrooms are closer from the hemicycle than women’s, like in the South African parliament (Ross, 2002, p. 194), or when recreational spaces, such as gyms, do not have a women’s locker room, like in the US Congress, thereby helping produce and reproduce ‘male homosocial capital’ (Bjarnegård, 2013). Infrastructure also has gendered consequences for workplace wellbeing. Seemingly trivial issues like sitting in the chamber can produce discomfort among women MPs: from the long benches in the UK House of Commons, where MPs may be wedged close to each other, to the high seats in the South African Parliament, wherein women’s feet do not touch the floor when they support their backs (Ross, 2002, p. 194). Likewise, the air conditioning in parliaments is set at a temperature that typically responds to men’s physiological needs and to their typical dress codes (suit and tie). Indeed, sartorial aspects are not gender-neutral either. Women MPs often find themselves in the double bind.
of dressing too colourfully (then being accused of trivialising the ‘seriousness’ of politics) or dressing too conservatively (Ross, 2002, p. 193). Cumulatively, these experiences remind women politicians that they are ‘space invaders’ who break the somatic norm of which bodies belong to parliament (Puwar, 2004).

Lastly, Inter-Parliamentary Union’s (IPU, 2016b, 2018) recent surveys of women MPs and parliamentary staff members suggest that they are frequently exposed to sexism and sexual harassment, the most blatant expressions of gender power relations, as has been globally highlighted by the #MeToo movement (Krook, 2018). Although male MPs are the usual perpetrators of such offences, the measures adopted by parliaments to prevent and act upon these misconducts are insufficient and inefficient. Existing shortcomings partially stem from apparently gender-neutral formal rules like parliamentary privilege (i.e. unrestrained free speech), which allows derogatory sexist language to go unsanctioned or from informal rules, including partisan logics that seek to protect the party brand from scandal (Collier and Raney, 2018; Culhane, 2019).

While gendered dynamics have been the main focus of the above-mentioned scholarly works on parliaments qua institutions, an intersectional approach is very much needed in the study of the parliamentary workplace in order to shed light on the constraints experienced by male and female MPs and staff with different backgrounds. In effect, institutions and organisations not only sustain ‘gender regimes’ but ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006), which requires the investigation of other grounds of discrimination in the parliamentary workplace, like race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and gender identity or ableness. For instance, Hawkesworth (2003) shows that the stereotyping, exclusion and challenging of the authority of black women MPs occurs through ‘racing-gendering’ biases embedded in the operation of parliamentary bodies, and Brown (2014) exposes how Black women state legislators’ experiences with racism and sexism shape their legislative decision-making and policy preferences. In their study of ethnic minority MPs’ legislative behaviour, Mügge et al. (2019, pp. 721–722) find that female ethnic minority MPs face ‘substantial setback’ when they hold decision-making positions and that their participating in predominantly social issue-related committees explains why they are the ones that fundamentally act for the interests of ethnic minority women. In the case of LGBTQI politicians, Juvonen (2016, pp. 67–68) pinpoints that outed lesbian politicians receive less support from their parties and present higher turnover rates. Both lesbian and ethnic minority female MPs also suffer more frequently harassment in parliaments and social networks than straight and ethnic majority women MPs (IPU, 2018, p. 13). In the case of age, being young has been found to be detrimental for women legislators, while it is an advantage for men (Erikson and Josefsson, 2019b). Men MPs who do not conform to the dominant organisational culture infused with hegemonic
masculinity might also feel excluded and see the representation of their interests neglected in gendered parliamentary workplaces (Bjarnegård and Murray, 2018).

3. Parliaments’ gendered inner workings and political representation

As organisational studies have pinpointed, no job is a disembodied (gender-free, class-free or race-free) ‘empty slot’ (Acker, 1990) because people cannot ‘leave gender at the door’ of their workplace (Gutek and Cohen, 1987). Admittedly, gender is already there, with men’s interests and hegemonic masculinity constituting an ‘organizing principle’ that distributes advantage and disadvantage, privilege and inclusion or subordination and exclusion into ordinary institutional functioning (Acker, 1992, p. 568). Gender-neutral workplaces simply do not exist (Acker, 1990, p. 139), although bias, especially when it comes in subtle forms, tends to be recognised and condemned only by members who experience it (cf. Martin, 2006, p. 255). Studies on women’s and men’s experience in the workplace have tackled issues related to the definition of jobs and recruitment patterns, sex segregation in the distribution of roles and responsibilities, devaluation of women’s work, gender pay gaps, norms of masculinity embedded in the organisational culture, work-family measures and various forms of workplace violence, including sexual harassment, among other topics (Chalmers, 2014, p. 2473).

Similarly, parliaments can also be seen as workplaces ‘with conditions of work, hours of operation, provisions for leave, and rewards and recognition for good work (...) that continue to discriminate against women and keep them positioned as “outsiders”’ (Palmieri, 2019, p. 183). By naturalising the interests, experiences and behaviours of ‘typical members’—that is, men—in their organisation (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 56), parliamentary workplaces yield different forms of gendered power dynamics. While not exclusive to this institution, the effect of workplace discrimination in parliaments is arguably more concerning because of what they represent in our society: parliaments, as standard setters themselves, should act as role model institutions (Dahlerup, 1988, p. 278; Childs, 2016, p. 6). Gender discrimination in parliaments undermines the very foundations of representative democracy (Dahlerup, 2006; Erikson and Josefsson, 2019a).

Adopting a gender-sensitive workplace perspective allows for a multi-layered analysis of political representation. The question of what difference does it make to have more women MPs (descriptive representation) in terms of policy outputs (substantive representation) or in terms of effects on mass feelings towards both female politicians and institutions and on citizens’ political engagement (symbolic representation) should be coupled with the question of how the parliamentary workplace favours male MPs’ scope for action while constraining female MPs’ capacity for agency. This new lens illuminates the multiple ways in which
existing gender inequalities in the organisation of parliaments produce an array of gendered outcomes for political representation, as Table 1 illustrates.

Gender-biased recruitment processes limit the diversity of descriptive representation and lead to more homogenous perspectives, realities and interests in the substantive representation carried out by MPs. At the symbolic level, the idea of politics as a ‘male business’ is perpetuated, which has a negative impact on citizens’ political engagement and feelings towards institutions (for a review, see Espírito-Santo and Verge, 2017). The gendered distribution of roles and responsibilities reinforces from a descriptive representation point of view stereotypes about different positions, roles or issue ownership in parliamentary work as either masculine or feminine. Simultaneously, it provides an unequal access to resources and status, which will impact on the substantive legislative work of MPs. Moreover, the vertical segregation of offices has implications in terms of the gender pay gap, as MPs holding leadership positions in the bureau of legislative assemblies, in parliamentary groups or in legislative committees receive an extra remuneration. Symbolically, it conflates political authority with masculinity and reifies the sexual division of labour in the public sphere. For its part, male homosocial practices, such as male informal networking, at the descriptive level, yield dissimilar access to career opportunities, thus affording men more positional power. It also produces an unequal access to information, resources and possibilities for deal making, affording men a more efficacious substantive representation. Symbolically, it evokes politics as a ‘behind-closed-doors’ activity that escapes the scrutiny of democratically elected arenas.

Another gendered aspect of the workplace relates to sexist practices, including, for example, adversarial styles of debate or a bullying culture—tolerated in many parliaments—that engrandise partisan differences for the sake of the spectacularisation of politics, with women MPs often being regarded as ‘soft targets for particularly crass forms of barracking’ (Ross, 2002, p. 195). These sexist practices generate feelings of uneasiness and discomfort amongst female MPs, leading to higher turnover rates (descriptive representation) and hampering efficiency in legislative action (substantive representation). Such a parliamentary mise-en-scène discredits politics in the eyes of the public and, more dramatically, legitimates the use of (verbal or physical) violence against political opponents, which dramatically affects women MPs, as observed in the UK with Brexit debates. Likewise, the negative treatment women MPs frequently receive, and the devaluation and contestation of their work and styles of debate, severely limits their legislative action (substantive representation). This may also lead them to retreat from politics (descriptive representation), thereby suggesting that women are not suited for politics—not tough enough or insufficiently prepared (symbolic representation).
### Table 1. Gendered discrimination in the parliamentary workplace and gendered outcomes for political representation

| Forms of gendered discrimination | Descriptive representation | Substantive representation | Symbolic representation |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Gender-biased recruitment processes | Lack of diversity           | Homogeneity in perspectives, realities and interests of MPs | Politics as ‘male business’; Negative impact on political engagement and feelings towards institutions |
| Gendered distribution of roles and responsibilities Male homosocial practices (for instance male networking) | Gender-based stereotyped functions Dissimilar access to career opportunities | Unequal access to resources and status; gender pay gap Unequal access to information, resources, and deal-making possibilities | Male political authority, reification of sexual division of labour Politics as a behind-door-closed business |
| Sexist practices (such as adversarial styles of debate, bullying culture, and contestation of women’s work and behaviour) Workplace harassment and violence (especially sexual harassment) | Uneasiness, discomfort, higher turnover rates for women | Unequal efficiency of legislative action | Women unfit for politics, legitimisation of violence against opponents |
| Shortage of work-family balance policies | Women’s retreatment from politics | Limitation of women’s scope of action | Legitimacy costs for parliaments; message sent to all women—not welcome to politics |
| Lack of gender mainstreaming tools and structures | Representation gap for women (and some men) with caring responsibilities | Representation gap for work-family policies | Certain women (and some men) unfit for politics; idea of politics as saturating all aspects of life |
|                                | Non-identification of lack of diversity as a problem | Gender-blind law-making | Gender-blind communication policy; perception of gender-equality as already achieved |
Concerning sexual harassment, one of the most severe forms of gender discrimination, its significant prevalence has detrimental effects on female MPs (and staff). It produces feelings of humiliation, anger, sadness, stress and anxiety, affecting their ability to work normally (substantive representation). The limited workplace policies to combat misconducts of this sort (IPU, 2016, 2018; Collier and Raney, 2018; Culhane, 2019) may push women to drop out from politics (descriptive representation). Furthermore, concerning symbolic representation, sexual misconduct sends a pernicious message to all women that parliaments are an unsafe and toxic space for them, leading to their opting out of politics. Parliaments should also be wary of the legitimacy costs for the institution brought about not just by the instances of sexual harassment suffered by their elected representatives and workers but also by the inadequate institutional responses that afford impunity to perpetrators.

The inadequacy of existing policy and legal frameworks that favour work-family balance, such as parental leaves or proxy voting, coupled with heavy workloads and long hours, produce a descriptive representation gap for women (and some men). As noted by Galea and Gaweda (2018, p. 277), the ‘masculine blueprint’ of parliamentary practices which conceive of MPs as ‘devoid of care responsibilities’ expects elected representatives to prove ‘their total availability to constituents and party challenges, even when they have just given birth’. The corresponding absence of MPs with care responsibilities might lead to a substantive representation gap relating to reconciliation of work and family and care needs of the population (Campbell and Childs, 2014). Additionally, politics is then symbolically constructed as an activity that saturates all aspects of MPs’ life, leading certain women (and some men) to regard themselves as unfit for politics (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014, p. 74).

The last of our examples focuses on the rare existence of a dedicated gender equality body in the parliamentary structure specifically devoted to gendering the institution’s inner workings and on the exceptionality of parliaments’ gender action plans. This has implications for the descriptive representation of both MPs and staff, as lack of diversity and their underlying causes may not be identified as a problem. Likewise, the lack of gender mainstreaming tools and gender training for MPs and staff shapes the legislation produced, affecting substantive representation, with bills being seldom preceded by a gender impact assessment. Symbolically, gender-blindness underpins parliaments’ communication and public engagement activities, evoking the idea that the institution is already a gender-equal space.

4. The parliamentary workplace perspective in practice

Inspired by feminist institutionalist studies of legislatures from an organisational point of view, practitioners’ efforts to enhance gender equality in parliaments
have translated research into practice by adopting a workplace perspective. This
can be seen in the promulgation of gender-sensitive parliaments toolkits issued
by a range of multilateral organisations, such as IPU (2011, 2016a), the European
Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2018) and the Organisation for Economic
Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018), applicable to parliaments of the
Global South and the Global North. A gender-sensitive parliamentary workplace
is defined as one in which its composition, structures, processes and outputs take
into account the realities, interests and needs of both men and women (IPU,
2011, p. 5). This entails mainstreaming a gender equality perspective throughout
the organisation and the key functions of parliaments, namely the legislative, the
oversight and the symbolic functions.

By posing questions to parliaments that assess their performance in key areas
of their work, these toolkits encourage MPs and parliamentary staff to reflect on,
and develop actions to redress, gender discrimination in this particular work-
place. While not all phrased in the same way, these toolkits share a reflective pro-
cess on the understanding that parliaments themselves need to uncover inbuilt,
recurring practices of gender discrimination before they can be eliminated.
Toolkits often start by examining access to the institution. Indicators are provided
to assess whether parliaments are equal opportunity employers and whether polit-
cical parties recruit candidates without discrimination. This survey continues by
examining whether women and men have equal opportunities to influence the
parliament’s working procedures, inquiring about the gender distribution of leg-
islative committees and the administrative structure, including leading roles, the
gender pay gap, and the availability of anti-harassment policies. Family leave
options, proxy vote mechanisms and family-friendly working hours provisions
also allow assessing the extent to which equality in influence is upheld by the
institution.

Likewise, the toolkits pay attention to whether (and how) gender is main-
streamed in the parliamentary agenda through a dedicated gender equality body
(committee, cross-party group, etc.) and/or through a specific gender equality
unit within the administrative structure. The provision of gender training to both
MPs and staff and the existence of gender budgeting and gender impact assess-
ment tools are also found among the indicators measuring how a parliament
guarantees the inclusion of gender issues in its inner workings and in legislative
outputs. Furthermore, the toolkits support parliaments in scrutinising their sym-
bolic function from a gender perspective, with indicators encompassing an analy-
sis of the gender-sensitivity of their physical spaces, including the existence of
child-care facilities, and their communication policy.

Practitioners rely, of course, on the exchange of ideas—both theoretical and
empirical—with academic colleagues, and vice versa. There are numerous exam-
pies of this exchange of ideas with parliaments, and indeed, the exchange of roles
between ‘practitioner’ and ‘academic’. Sarah Childs’ (Birbeck, University of London) secondment to Westminster in 2016 provided an opportunity to test IPU’s framework (Childs, 2016a, b) originally developed by Sonia Palmieri (Australian National University) while wearing a practitioner’s hat. As an academic placed in a parliamentary workplace, Childs was able to extend IPU’s work by conceptualising ‘diversity-sensitive’ parliaments, devising 43 recommendations for the British Parliament some of which have now been implemented. The Swedish Parliament’s gender equality group has a tradition of working with academic scholars, noted for instance in Lenita Freidenvall’s (Stockholm University) advisory work and in Josefina Erikson and Cecilia Josefsson’s (Uppsala University) collaborative study of MPs’ gendered working conditions in 2016. Likewise, Fiona Mackay (University of Edinburgh), Professor Sarah Childs, Lenita Freidenvall and Josefina Erikson, along with officers from EIGE and OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, participated in a conference on gender-sensitive parliaments hosted by the Parliament of Catalonia. The conference catalysed the institution’s gender audit commissioned to a team of gender consultants led by Tània Verge (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), a process that culminated in the adoption of the first gender action plan of the Catalan legislature in January 2020, building on IPU’s and EIGE’s gender-sensitive parliaments frameworks. Finally, Johanna Kantola (Tampere University) and her team are currently leading a 5-year (2018–2023) research project (EUGenDem) that analyses the gendered policies and practices of the European Parliament’s political groups, shadowing many elected representatives and staff.

There is significant value, then, in the positive feedback loop between practitioner and academic perspectives on parliaments as workplaces, which promotes further theoretical development and empirical inquiry into the ‘mechanisms and agents of change and continuity’ and into the extent to which ‘formal mandates (institutional design) can effect change especially if they work in opposition to informal rules’ (Palmieri, 2019, p. 190). The different actors inhabiting parliaments

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2Between June and December 2019, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee continued to inquire into the parliament’s gender-sensitivity, with the inquiry lapsing with the dissolution of parliament in late 2019. See: https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/gender-sensitive-parliament-audit-inquiry-17–19/.

3See Gender Equality Plan. Parliament of Catalonia (2020–2023): https://www.parlament.cat/document/actualitat/53018704.pdf.

4Visit EUGenDem website: https://research.uta.fi/eugendem/about-us/.
may not even be aware of the existence of informal rules ‘because these are so nor-
malised and taken-for-granted as to render them invisible’ (Chappell and
Waylen, 2013, p. 609). It is our task as researchers to make these informal rules
visible, in order to change them (Kenny, 2014).

5. Reframing parliaments as gendered workplaces

This Special Section addresses a set of overlapping questions related to the work-
ning conditions within parliaments, expanding existing research on the gendered
institutional logics, norms and practices that shape parliamentary politics. The
contributions to this issue combine feminist institutionalist frameworks with new
empirical insights on how the parliamentary workplace is gendered. Altogether,
they cover a broad range of empirical case studies, including parliaments from
world regions as diverse as Europe, Oceania and the Americas. Each contribution
addresses a crucial theme to explore how gender is inscribed in the inner workings
of parliaments, namely the working conditions of MPs, the recruitment of clerks,
performance and promotion dynamics, work-family policies and anti-harassment
policies.

Understanding legislative assemblies as a site of gender power relations, all
contributors assess women’s positional power within the parliamentary work-
place as well as women’s power relative to men’s. This endeavour cannot be lim-
ited to counting men and women in parliamentary bodies and to identifying sex
differences in legislative behaviour though dichotomous sex analyses, as both
strategies will fail to account for the force of gender norms and will lead to
individual-level explanations (Lovenduski, 1998, p. 349). This Special Section
shows how an array of methodological approaches and data sources can be used
to capture how the gendered dynamics within parliaments affect MPs’ and parlia-
mentary staffers’ ability to perform their tasks and responsibilities on equal terms.
Ethnographic methods, analyses of parliamentary debates, process tracing and
quantitative analyses can all be used innovatively to unveil the genderedness of
the parliamentary workplace while being sensitive to context differences.

Josefina Erikson and Cecilia Josefsson’s agenda-setting piece sets out the con-
ceptual and methodological dimensions of researching parliaments as a gendered
workplace. Departing from the perspective of the individual MP and the everyday
working conditions they face, this approach considers the experiences of both
men and women and focuses on both formal and informal aspects of the working
environment. In more detail, they suggest five interconnected and overlapping
dimensions of the parliamentary workplace, namely the organisation of work,
tasks and assignments, leadership, infrastructure and interaction with peers.

Subsequent contributions provide in-depth empirical analyses of different
aspects of the parliamentary workplace. Cherry Miller investigates workplace
practices for non-elected parliamentary actors, focusing on the 2014 recruitment of the Clerk of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom. Drawing on ethnographic methods, combined with secondary analysis, she examines how the discursive struggles underpinning this particular selection process were riddled with gendered constructs concerning procedural experience and expertise, bureaucratic standards, or issues of outsiders. As Miller pinpoints, the fact that the gender of the female applicant was simultaneously made visible and gendered structures were rendered invisible speaks to how inequality was ‘done’ in the recruitment of a high-ranked staff member.

Sonia Palmieri and Kerryn Baker examine family–friendly workplace policies in the New Zealand Parliament. In doing so, they outline a new methodological approach to trace how international norms are localised in specific contexts, thereby expanding existing understandings of norm diffusion. They show the importance of an enabling environment, sustained by critical actors, for norm establishment. This notwithstanding, they also pinpoint the challenges found in the processes of localisation and institutionalisation of gender-sensitive norms, in which the informal rules of parliamentary life play a crucial role.

Michal Smrek, using an original database and applying quantitative methods, tackles the gendered dynamics underlying the promotion to senior positions in the Czech parliament and the chances of bill sponsorship and law making. The interaction of these gendered dynamics with MPs’ membership to governing or opposition parties yields a heterogeneous effect for male and women elected representatives. Such a conditional access to the political capital derived from holding senior positions and sponsoring bills and passing laws indicates that political parties are key distributors of advantage and disadvantage in the parliamentary workplace.

Lastly, Tània Verge, covering the legislative chambers of Europe (including the European Parliament) and the Americas, assesses whether international organisations’ calls for combating sexism and sexual harassment in politics have led parliaments to adopt specific institutional policies in this field. She shows that, to date, very few legislative chambers count with complaint mechanisms to deal with harassment and even those that do often fail to afford adequate protection and reparation to survivors. Her analysis also illustrates the ways in which the implementation of new formal rules is constrained by pre-existing informal rules, which may even reinscribe gender in negative ways.

In one way or another, all articles refer to political parties, as the latter are not only the gatekeepers of elected office but they also contribute to establishing parliaments’ organising principles. For one thing, political parties impose discipline on their respective parliamentary benches. In the absence of complaint mechanisms dealing with sexual harassment, it is political parties’ responsibility to police and sanction their affiliated MPs and staff for misconducts. Likewise, key
decisions on coalition agreements, bill initiatives and the distribution of positions and roles in the institution’s decision-making bodies and legislative committees are made behind doors by parties or parliamentary groups, whose leadership remains highly masculinised. Finally, various of the articles in this Special Section point out how the parliamentary workplace might be re-gendered, identifying best practices and their underlying enabling factors. To a large extent, this goal informs the work of the Gender-Focused Parliamentary Institutions Research Network, set up in 2013 to link researchers examining parliaments from a gendered perspective, which the contributors of this Special Section belong to.5

6. Conclusions
As has been discussed, studying the inner workings of parliaments is important in itself as gender equality is a core democratic principle. Yet, we have also exposed how an unequal parliamentary workplace yields multiple inequalities in the representative process, biasing the outcomes of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Therefore, the workplace perspective grounded on feminist institutionalist analyses put forth in this article and in this Special Section as a whole furthers the understanding of parliaments’ overly masculinised inner workings in significant ways, broadening the conceptual and methodological tools for studying legislative assemblies and establishing links to wider debates in both political science and the practitioner field.

To conclude, central questions of parliamentary studies scholarship as well as key questions of political representation can only be partially addressed without paying attention to the relational dynamics of gender that take place in legislative assemblies. Failure to recognise that the oppositional and hierarchical character of gender shapes the experience of participants in political institutions, which are also workplaces, will only explain away the (re)production of inequality, including patterns of power distribution that perpetuate men’s advantage and women’s disadvantage.

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5The network has produced as well the Special Section guest-edited by Joan Grace and Marian Sawer, ‘Representing Gender Equality: Specialised Parliamentary Bodies’ (Parliamentary Affairs, 69:4, 2016). The network welcomes new members and its website can be found at: http://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/research/projects/gender-research/gender-focused-parliamentary-institutions-research-network.
Conflict of interest
None declared

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