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Feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics in parliamentary contexts

Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo

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Abstract

In the context of the prevalence of anti-gender politics in Europe, political institutions, such as parliaments, have become arenas of political struggles around gender and gender equality. While feminist scholarship has studied anti-gender politics, less attention has been paid to feminist responses to such opposition. The contribution of this article is to conceptualize feminist responses to anti-gender politics within political institutions, which we name feminist *institutional* responses. This conceptualization entails proposing a set of analytical categories for capturing forms of feminist institutional responses, namely "knowledge", "coalition-building", "rule-making" and "everyday pragmatic engagement". We analyse plenary debates on gender equality as well as 135 interviews of Members of the European Parliament and political staff in two terms which witnessed a rise in anti-gender politics, 2014-2019 and 2019-2024. The conceptualization of feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics in parliaments is important for identifying how institutional actors are countering the destructive potential of anti-gender politics and safeguarding parliaments as democratic sites of advancement in gender equality policies.

Keywords: Anti-gender politics; feminist institutional responses; feminist politics; European Parliament; EU gender equality politics

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality faces unprecedented challenges. Anti-gender, homophobic and xenophobic political parties and movements increasingly question gender, sexuality and race equality policies. Parliaments have become important sites of anti-gender politics. Anti-gender opposition affects feminist parliamentary politics by delegitimizing and questioning feminist institutions and knowledge, opposing gender equality policymaking, proposing anti-gender policies, and creating hostile contexts to the parliamentary advancing of gender equality. There is an urgent need to address parliaments as arenas of political struggles around gender equality, which stage not only attacks by anti-gender and far right parties but also feminist responses to such opposition.

The research objective of this article is to conceptualise feminist institutional responses against anti-gender opposition. This conceptualization entails identifying and proposing a set of analytical categories that allow capturing forms of feminist institutional responses. A key contribution of the article is to term these as "knowledge", "coalition-building", "rule-making" and "everyday pragmatic engagement". While feminist scholarship has concentrated on analyzing anti-gender movement strategies (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Krizsan and Roggeband 2021; Dietze and Roth 2020; Verloo 2018a), recently in parliamentary contexts too (Berthet 2022), less attention is paid to feminist responses to such opposition. Feminist responses are of crucial importance for defending gender equality gains within democratic institutions, opposing the delegitimation of gender knowledge, and safeguarding democracy. The scarce extant research on feminist responses

to anti-gender opposition has analyzed responses from social movements and civil society (Cullen 2021; Krizsan and Roggeband 2021; Kurylo 2022), not from institutions. The contribution of this article is to conceptualise feminist responses to anti-gender opposition in an institutional, parliamentary, context.

Our conceptual proposal of categories of feminist institutional responses - "knowledge", "coalition-building", "rule-making" and "everyday pragmatic engagement" - draws both on existing theory and, inductively, on our empirical analysis. First, knowledge is a crucial analytical category to understand feminist responses because it is determinant for both anti-gender and feminist actors (Verloo 2018b) in constructing their envisioned project of society (Walby 2009), as it also emerges from our data. For this reason, we include within the broader category of knowledge what extant literature defines discursive responses (Cullen 2021; Luna 2020). This broader category allows us to understand the role of knowledge in feminist institutional responses, and to analyse the discourses and practices concerning knowledge at the individual, political group, and parliamentary levels. Second, coalition-building, present in our findings, draws on scholarly debates on coalitions in feminist movements (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021; Zavella 2020) and institutions (Warasin et al 2019; Tsebelis 1995).

We propose two additional responses, namely rule-making and everyday pragmatic engagement, that we inductively discern from the empirical analysis in the European parliamentary context, supported by feminist institutionalism (Chappell and Waylen 2013) and applications of practice theory in European integration (Adler-Nissen 2016). By rule-making we mean the formal and informal rules and concerted institutional efforts and resources that political parties, parliament as

a whole, or parliamentary committees devote to responding to anti-gender opposition. By everyday pragmatic engagement we mean the everyday pragmatic action and practices of feminist actors engaging with anti-gender actors within parliamentary contexts. We argue that the identification of feminist institutional response in parliaments is key to understand and counter the destructive potential of far-right populist opposition and the possibility for parliaments to remain democratic sites of advancement in gender equality.

We build the concepts from an empirical analysis of feminist institutional responses to anti-gender opposition in the context of the European Parliament. As a conglomerate of 27 member states, their political parties and political cultures, the parliament's legislative powers have increased significantly over the past decade bringing it on par with other decision-making institutions of the European Union. The increased popularity of far-right populist parties which use opposition to gender equality to fuel their power gains has impacted on the European Parliament too. After the 2019 elections, the number of politicians who oppose gender equality and women's rights grew to over 30 percent (around 210 out of 705 MEPs). The number doubled when compared to the previous legislature (Zacharenko 2020). The European parliament has become the key site of far-right populist opposition to gender, equality and women's rights in Europe.

Our research questions are: How to understand feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics in the European Parliament? How are they manifested at the individual, political group and parliamentary levels? The research material is based on two data sets: first, 52 plenary debates on gender equality, and, second, 135 interviews with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and political staff from all political groups and genders. The time frame covers two legislative

terms of the parliament which witnessed a rise in anti-gender politics: 2014-2019 and 2019-2024. With the help of this empirical analysis, the broader aim is to build concepts about feminist institutional responses which can be applied beyond the specific context of the European Parliament.

FEMINIST RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER POLITICS

Anti-gender movement strategies have been widely researched both in Europe and globally. They include a variety of transnational and national strategies ranging from funding, ideas, and repertoires of action against gender and sexuality rights (Datta 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In the EU, they include not only the usual lobbying and advocacy strategies, but also misinformation and slanderous messages through online and grassroot campaigns that misrepresent legal and scientific facts about gender to mobilize people against women and LGBTIQ* human rights and feminist organizations (Zacharenko 2020).

Anti-gender actors not only actively oppose and dismantle feminist politics in Europe, through gender policy backsliding, delegitimating and de-funding feminist NGOs, excluding feminist advocates from policy consultations and perpetrating violence against them (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Krizsan and Roggeband 2021); they also construct alternative anti-gender knowledge to replace feminist knowledge (Verloo 2018b; Paternotte and Verloo 2021). We employ the expression “anti-gender politics” for capturing such destructive and constructive dimensions of the anti-gender project.

Far-right parties bring anti-gender politics to parliamentary contexts. Far right includes both illiberal-democratic (radical right) and anti-democratic (extreme right) parties (Mudde 2020), accounting for the increasing links between radical and extreme right among supporters and party leaders (Pirro 2022). Opposition to gender equality is central in far-right ideology (Dietze and Roth 2020). In the European Parliament, the far-right's direct opposition strategies manifest as outright rejection of gender equality, and with reference to what anti-gender actors call "gender ideology" – which vilifies gender knowledge as indoctrination. Indirect opposition strategies instrumentalize native women's rights to argue against a supposed "threat" of Muslims and racialized minorities (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2022). Far-right opposition impacts the democratic workings of parliaments by blocking gender equality policy initiatives and creating a hostile atmosphere for advancing gender equality. Far-right actors, for instance, fill the human rights frame in parliament with anti-gender content (Mos 2020; Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2022).

Anti-gender politics has increasingly antagonized the debates on gender equality in parliaments, calling for feminist action to respond to such attacks. Still, research has paid less attention to feminist responses to anti-gender politics. When it has done so, it has analyzed responses in social movements, including women's and feminist movements (Cullen 2021; Krizsan and Roggeband 2021; Kurylo 2022; Luna 2020; Zavella 2020). A research agenda on feminist responses to anti-gender politics within institutions is yet to emerge.

In this article we bring scholarly attention to feminist responses to anti-gender politics as a relevant object of analysis, and, to understand the still unexplored phenomenon of feminist *institutional* responses to anti-gender politics, we provide a novel conceptualization. We draw on the rich

literature on anti-gender politics and feminist movements, particularly the movements' response to anti-gender opposition, for conceptualizing the categories of feminist institutional responses of "knowledge" and "coalition-building", in the latter with reference to institutional literature too. To conceptualize "rule-making" and "everyday pragmatic engagement" we draw inductively on our own empirical findings to identify the categories, and support our conceptualization through existing feminist research on agency, institutionalism, parliamentarism, practice, and representation. We do so because there is not a specific literature addressing feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics, and existing literature on feminist movement responses is mostly focused around discursive and coalition-building strategies. Still, our data showed responses that go beyond discourses and coalitions that required conceptualization.

We begin by defining our central terms - feminism feminist responses, and feminist institutional responses - zooming in on the last of these. We define feminism as a political project that aims at transforming unequal gender and intersectional power hierarchies, through an "analysis of injustice", "a vision of an alternative", and actions to redress injustice (Dean and Maiguashca 2018, 386). We define feminist responses as feminist action, practice and discourse to counter opposition to gender equality and promote an equality agenda.

Feminist *institutional* responses signify the response to anti-gender politics that is articulated by politicians, staff, committees in a parliamentary context, or by a body that represents the whole institution. Feminist research shows that despite the EU institutional commitment to gender equality and human rights as European values (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín 2019), feminist actors within institutions are still "marginalised insiders" (Banaszak 2010), that seek policy reform

in areas generally not prioritized in institutional agendas and/or resisted by actors interested in maintaining the unequal status quo. In this respect these feminists are "institutional activists" (Pettinicchio 2012) that develop strategies to promote gender equality policies and knowledge within existing political and discursive constraints (Eyben 2010). Feminist institutional actors work inside and outside the institutions (Banaszak 2010). Within institutions, opportunities for articulating feminist responses exist both at the level of individual "critical actors" (Celis 2009) pushing gender equality agendas forward, and as part of collective structures of feminist governance such as gender equality committees that operate to include gender equality in parliamentary work (Sawer 2020). Feminists can ally with political actors inside the institution or with "feminist critical friends" as external gender experts (Chappell and Mackay 2020) and activists that provide knowledge to counter opposition to gender equality. Researching feminist individual and collective activism within institutions is relevant for identifying pro-equality factors for countering anti-gender opposition in increasingly hostile institutional contexts (Verloo 2018a).

Our proposed conceptual categories of feminist institutional responses are "knowledge", "coalition-building", "rule-making", and "everyday pragmatic engagement". Studies of feminist responses have focused to date on discourses and coalition-building. Since "rule-making" and "everyday pragmatic engagement" are not so much theorized, we develop an inductive conceptualization by identifying the categories empirically and defining them better with theoretical support and in the conclusion.

We propose to broaden to the category of knowledge the notion of discursive or framing strategies currently employed in feminist movements' research (Cullen 2021; Luna 2020; Zavella 2020;

Krizsan and Roggeband 2021) because a) knowledge is essential for both anti-gender and feminist actors (Verloo 2018b; Paternotte and Verloo 2021; Korolczuk 2020) in constructing their envisioned project of society (Walby 2009; Verloo and Paternotte 2018), and b) our data include responses such as offering information on gender equality through reports and data to counter misinformation about gender diffused by anti-gender actors, that goes beyond the categorization of discursive strategies and implies what we call "countering (anti-gender) with knowledge".

Knowledge production, or episteme, as Verloo (2018b) and Paternotte and Verloo (2021) argue, plays a key role in dynamics of opposition to feminist politics, because anti-gender actors seek to attain cultural hegemony to spread their authoritarian societal project by delegitimating gender knowledge for being ideological rather than scientific and attacking or misinforming about gender equality data. The construction and diffusion of feminist knowledge proves fundamental also for counteracting anti-gender opposition, such as that against abortion in Poland, where Korolczuk (2020) shows how feminist epistemic strategies mobilized women through eye-opening messages on the worsening of women's lives that the abortion ban would produce.

The broader concept of knowledge proposed here includes discursive approaches in feminist movement's studies that analyze feminist discourses articulated to counter anti-gender frames. Cullen (2021) uses the term "counterframing" to analyse feminist responses to right-wing populism in the EU and finds three feminist counterframings: (i) "polarization-vilification" (that presents feminists as the real representatives of women's interests), (ii) "frame debunking" (that deconstructs right populist frames as anti-gender), and (iii) "frame saving" (that constructs feminism as a progressive force for Europe). In the US context, analyses of reproductive justice

movement of women of colour by Patricia Zavella (2020) and Zakiya Luna (2020) show the relevance of discursive action to promote cultural shifts to contrast the vilification of women of colour by conservative forces, through strategically using human rights frames to counteract governmental restrictive domestic access to rights (Luna 2020) and reframing discourse that blames marginalised subjects in relation to health towards empowering women of colour (Zavella 2020). By showing how feminist activists construct and use knowledge to counteract anti-gender opposition, the literature on feminist movements' discursive responses provides helpful insights for analyzing knowledge responses within institutions too.

Coalition-building is a well-known strategy from social movement studies that involves bringing new, in our case pro-equality, actors together (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021). Coalitions imply collaboration between organizations or movements towards common goals, in loose or coordinated ways. Counteracting anti-gender opposition to gender equality requires new coalitions of actors (Sauer 2020). Krizsan and Roggeband (2021) found that contestation around gender equality can expand awareness of gender issues among the public and promote the emergence of new, broader coalitions between pro-equality actors, and the public support of women's rights by actors who in the past had not publicly defended gender equality. Gender can thus become part of a democratization struggle against illiberal practices.

While feminist movement's literature on coalition-building provides insights for understanding feminist institutional responses, coalitions within institutions have their specificities. Institutional coalitions involve a politics of cohesion, bargain, exchange, compromise, and conflict (Warasin et al 2019; Vercesi 2016). Belonging to the same parliamentary committee can facilitate cohesive

voting practices, which tend to be strong in the case of gender equality (Warasin et al 2019). However, downsides to the collaboration emerge when parliamentarians defending gender equality reach an agreement within the gender equality committee about a particular issue but must then persuade members from their political groups to join the agreement (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022). For an often unprioritized or contested issue such as gender equality this might be a complicated endeavour. The kind of decision-making procedures (e.g. voting of agreements required) and discipline employed in parties and political groups can facilitate or hinder the making of institutional coalitions (Tsebelis 1995; Vercesi 2016) and thus the support given to gender equality agreements. In the EP cohesive voting behaviour is particularly important for large political groups such as EPP and S&D, but cohesion is a negotiated compromise between European and national parties (Kantola, Elomäki and Ahrens 2022). At the same time gender and LGBTIQ* issues are, for instance, divisive for the EPP group (Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2022). In sum, coalition-building in anti-gender times could promote new broader alliances, but also hinder reaching a consensus around a contested issue; and the European Parliament can offer institutional spaces for making alliances within gender-specialised committees, within the constraints of political group and party politics.

Rule-making responses include the formal and informal rules and concerted institutional efforts and resources that political parties, parliament as a whole, or parliamentary committees dedicate to responding to anti-gender opposition. The conceptualization of rule-making and everyday pragmatic engagement draws inductively on the findings from our European Parliament's study, as well as from the theory of feminist institutionalism, that has articulated a framework for analysing gendered formal - codified, written - rules and informal, unwritten, rules as determinant

in counteracting or reproducing inequalities (Chappell and Waylen 2013). Developing feminist institutionalism, Francesca Gains and Vivien Lowndes (2022) focus on the notion of "rules in use" in organisations or the "interactions between specific institutional rules and the actors who interpret and enact them". Rules-in-use are a mixture of both formal and informal rules with some rules sat at the most formal end of the continuum (such as quotas), others in the middle, and others positioned at the most informal end (dividing speaking time in meetings equally) (Gains and Lowndes 2022; Kantola 2022). Rules-in-use are relevant to analyze and understand the everyday actions and practices in countering the effects of anti-gender actors in a parliamentary context. The category of rule-making responses allows us to identify and analyze the formal rules that institutions adopt or reform to counter anti-gender opposition, and the informal institutional practices that promote pro-equality behaviour and/or discipline anti-gender behaviour. The concept of everyday pragmatic engagement complements rule-making responses by pointing at the individual and collective action and practices that feminist institutional activists (Pettinicchio 2012; Eyben 2010) pragmatically devise in their everyday coping with the actors opposing gender equality within the shared institution.

Everyday pragmatic engagement responses seek to capture the everyday pragmatic engagement, through action and practices, of feminist actors with anti-gender actors within the parliamentary context. Such everyday practices have been theorised by different variants of practice theories, which focus on the everyday, the routines, the ways of doing things foregrounding the importance of activity, performance and work in the creation and perpetuation of all forms of social life (Nicolini 2017, 3; Adler-Nissen 2016). For example, institutions are kept in existence through routinized performances of social and material activities of actors that engage with each other's

work (Nicolini 2017, 8). What makes practices distinct from behaviour and action is that practices are organized and patterned. Practices are regular forms of action and mutually recognizable for communities of practitioners (Pouliot 2016; Watson 2017: 172), such as, in parliaments or workplaces, the organization of meetings and debates. Feminist scholarship has shown how such practices are gendered and rely on gender norms, including gendered interaction in different workplaces or politics (Acker 1990).

We contribute to this emerging research on feminist institutional responses by focusing on the European Parliament. Parliaments provide unique institutional contexts for countering anti-gender politics. Parliamentary work is shaped by the institutional context of parliamentary rules of procedures, by formations of parliamentary political groups and their formal statutes and informal ways of working; and by patterns of coalition-building, all of which govern the work that parliamentarians do as individual politicians, or members of political parties or committees.

The European Parliament represents a complex multi-layered political institution where to study feminist responses to far-right populism. Unlike other representative institutions, it is a sui generis institution in the world, since it has more intervention powers compared to other transnational parliaments (it co-legislates with the European Council in most policy areas, approves the budget and nomination of the President of the Commission and Commissioners), but has limited impact compared to national parliaments as it does not have the right to initiate legislation (the European Commission does). It has 705 Members of European Parliament (MEPs) from 27 member states after Brexit (2020). The MEPs do not sit in national groups but in transnational political groups where parties with similar political ideologies come together. In the current parliament, there are

seven political groups with different political weight: European People's Party (EPP 187 MEPs), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D 147 MEPs), Renew Europe (Renew 98 MEPs), Identity and Democracy (ID 75 MEPs), the Greens (Greens/EFA 69 MEPs), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR 62 MEPs), and the Left (GUE/NGL 39 MEPs). Of these seven groups, two are far-right populists, namely the ECR and the ID. In the previous legislature, there was a third group, the EFDD, part of which was right populist. Mainstream groups also include political parties which opposed gender equality or were far-right populist. The most well-known example is the Hungarian Fidesz in the EPP (until 2021).

Far-right populists have been shown to have a discursive impact in the European Parliament rather than an impact on actual gender policies. Their rise has made the political struggle over gender equality more visible. Gender equality policies that were not questioned in the past such as equal pay or gender-based violence are now directly challenged. LGBTIQ* rights and sexual and reproductive rights are attacked for being “unnatural” and anti-family, and gender equality is treated by far-right populists as dangerous indoctrination (Berthet 2022). In this polarized context, the EP has developed structures of feminist governance for promoting feminist policies such as the Gender Equality and Women’s Rights (FEMM) Committee, a gender mainstreaming network across all parliamentary committees, gender action plans and sexual harassment policies for parliamentary staff, and intergroups of MEPs to promote LGBTIQ*, race and other equality policies (Kantola and Lombardo 2023). These structures are important arenas for articulating feminist responses.

In our empirical analysis, we explore feminist responses against far-right populism in the European Parliament at different levels: the individual, political group and parliamentary levels. This allows us to account for the differences between and within political groups regarding positionings around gender, with individual MEPs within a group and particular groups being more proactive than other MEPs and political groups, and to observe the responses of the parliament as an institution.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH MATERIAL

Methodologically, the article is based on a constructivist, discursive approach to political analysis. This calls for analyses of how actors employ particular frames with the aim of constructing realities: opening some lines of interpretation of the social world and closing off others. The methodological approach means not just identifying predefined feminist responses but analysing the meanings these responses take in the parliamentary context and scrutinizing how they are framed and expressed by different political actors, and how they shape the parliamentary context. A discursive approach pays attention to how policy problems and solutions are constructed in political debates (Bacchi 2009). We combine the discursive approach with feminist institutionalism (Gains and Lowndes 2022; Chappell and Waylen 2013), and operationalize our concepts of feminist institutional responses by drawing on the conceptualization proposed in the theory section of this article: knowledge, coalition-building, rule-making and everyday pragmatic engagement. While the first two draw on existing theory, for the last two under-theorized categories we developed an inductive conceptualization, then supported by practice and feminist institutionalism theories, in an exercise of moving from data to concepts. We drew on Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1997) methodology to capture words and sentences employed and

regularly repeated across the texts, and dimensions of ideas that are implicit in the texts, discussing the outcome of this inductive process between the authors to arrive at the concepts that would more accurately describe the findings about feminist institutional responses.

The empirical analysis is based on qualitative methods of content analysis of plenary debates and research interviews. The choice of plenary debates allows to capture discourses by MEPs from all political groups, and the plenary is also the forum where the far-right is particularly vocal, which offers the possibility of finding discourses that counter opposition against gender equality. We analyzed a selection of plenary debates on gender equality from the legislatures 2014-2019 and 2019-2024 (N=50) employing the search keywords “gender”, “gender equality”, “women”, “sex”, “sexuality”, “LGBTI” from 2019 to June 2021, as well as two debates on the State of the Union 2020 (N=2).

We first reviewed all EP parliamentary debates on gender for the 2014-2019 parliamentary term and the 2019-2024 term until June 2021. In this case we conducted an online search of all plenary debates, and using the aforementioned keywords we identified a total of 100 plenary debates for the 2014-2019 parliamentary term and 18 for 2019-2024 legislative term. The range of topics illustrates the relevance of gender to a wide variety of issues, including sexual and reproductive rights, gender in science and education, LGTBIQ* rights, equal pay and employment, gender in Covid19, external relations, trade agreements, and media. To these debates we added two plenaries on the State of the Union 2020 due to the commitment to gender, sexuality, and race equality that EC President von der Leyen has expressed on such occasion.

We then selected 50 debates on gender and the two debates on the State of the Union for closer analysis, considering also the documents the EP adopted on gender backlash resulting from the debates. The selection was informed by a purposive sampling of those debates that offered variety and richness in the interpretations of gender equality by EP political groups. This type of qualitative sampling aims at intentionally selecting debates about gender equality within the selected timeframe to determine the interpretative dimensions (Luborsky and Rubinstein 1995) of the responses of gender equality in parliamentary interventions. We then analyzed the speeches of MEPs from different political groups and used our theoretical framework on feminist institutional responses to distil their meanings. To operationalize responses, we focused on discourses that directly respond to anti-gender interventions, refer to a general context of backlash/resistance/opposition to gender equality, explicitly address the issue of resistance. The patterns encountered tended to be similar across the debates independently from the topic. To identify both individual MEPs and political groups' responses, we traced in the analyzed plenaries when MEPs spoke on behalf of their political group.

To capture individual and political group levels to counter opposition to gender equality in the EP we recurred to interviews (N=135) with MEPs and staff conducted between 2018 and 2021 during the 8th and 9th parliaments in Brussels, Strasbourg and - after the Covid-19 pandemic - online (see Table 1). The interviews formed part of a larger study about the gendered practices and policies of the European Parliament's political groups conducted by members of the research project. Informants included MEPs, their assistants, political group and parliamentary staff, forming a representative sample of all political groups and ensuring a diversity of member states, genders, and seniority. Semi-structured interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and anonymized,

included questions about EP's political groups' gender equality practices and policy-making practices especially in relation to equality policies.

INSERT HERE ***Table 1. Interviews with MEPs and Staff at the European Parliament 2018–2021***

The interviews were coded by the members of the research project using Atlas.ti. Codes were developed deductively as well as inductively over several periodic team meetings, and covered both topical and theoretical codes, for example, political group identity, democratic practices of the political groups, and populism. To ensure intercoder reliability, and to offset the risk of inconsistent interpretation, team members coded two interviews alternately before reporting important aspects in a research diary that was accessible to everyone, to enable rigorous comparison of the way the codes had been used throughout. The co-occurance of the codes "opposition to gender equality" and "populism" was that employed for the purpose of this article. Using Atlas.ti report, we analyzed and compared the interview material in an iterative process to isolate the strategies to counteract opposition to gender equality in the political groups.

FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE RESPONSES

A variety of feminist knowledge responses against anti-gender politics can be discerned from our research material. These included individual politicians and members of staff marking a difference from far-right politicians, taking pride in being different from them, claiming to be real democrats

that do not support antagonistic politics but rather providing a vision of democratic and inclusive Europe. One MEP described to us in an interview how she was proud about the opposition she faced when defending gender equality. It was a sign of effective work on the topic: "A lot of enemies, a lot of honour", she put it (S&D MEP F 060320). In the plenary debate on the State of the Union in which the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, faced opposition from far-right politicians for her support of gender, race, and LGBTIQ* equality in her speech (P9_PV(2020)09-16(3)), the leader of the S&D group Iratxe García told von der Leyen "If I were you I would be very proud to listen to the critiques of the extreme right you have received during this plenary session, because they demonstrate very much your commitment to construct more and better Europe." A response in terms knowledge about the project of society alternative to that of anti-gender actors is offered by presenting MEPs different from far-right politicians as role models for democracy, and feminism as a project for the future of Europe: "Europe will be social and fair or will cease to exist (…) Europe will be feminist or will cease to exist. Because all these are values that unite our project: equality, justice, tolerance, solidarity…" (P9_PV(2020)09-16(3)). Defending progressive European values is a discourse developed for protecting the European project from far-right attacks in other European institutions such as the Commission (Ruzza 2021).

Proactive responses come from MEPs of progressive groups that by intersecting gender and class (Tania González, GUE/NGL F, A8-0213/2015), envision societal projects alternative to those proposed by RRP by "radically rethinking the value of paid and of unpaid work" (Evelyn Regner S&D F, CRE 21/01/2021-6) and demanding a "care pact" that puts "people's wellbeing and life at the center of all policies" (Diana Riba I Giner F, Greens/EFA, CRE 21/01/2021-6). The Left, Green and S&D interventions show some awareness of intersectionality, as in S&D MEP Evin Incir speech where she praises the Commission's "inclusion of intersectional perspective" as key "to

make a true feminist Europe possible". Her proposal is to apply intersectionality by making the EU support "financially" and "institutionally" women's rights organisations that do intersectional work on "LGBTQI rights and anti-racism" (CRE 21/01/2021-6).

Countering with knowledge allows individual MEPs and staff to respond to RRP disinformation campaigns (S&D Staff F 020320) and challenge typical populist attacks on expertise (Ruzza 2021). MEPs also countered the impact of populism through explaining how politics is done in the European Parliament. One interviewee described to us how being an MEP was a "public communication" and "outreach" job, which she explained counters the misinformation about the way that politics is done and the way that "populism feeds on a kind of sense of alienation from politicians and politics and the sense that they're all as bad as each other" (Greens/EFA MEP F 210220). Offering transparent knowledge to citizens about policymaking is a general response to populist politics that is also used for countering disinformation about gender.

At the political group level, countering with knowledge was one important discursive response. For instance, the Green MEP Heidi Hautala commissioned a report on anti-gender actors in the EU written by Elena Zacharenko (2020), that details the tactics used by anti-gender actors, their linkages with MEPs, and the funding which is passed between the actors. Interestingly, the report stresses the importance of presenting a progressive agenda and alternatives on equality to those presented by far-right populists. This agenda should, according to the report, center "on the socio-economic concerns of voters, which are set to only become more prominent as we enter another economic crisis provoked by the global pandemic of COVID-19" (Zacharenko 2020: 7).

Apart from the elaboration of reports by "feminist critical friends" (Chappell and Mackay 2020), knowledge strategies include offering data of inequality to counter opposition. In the debate on the Istanbul Convention that anti-gender actors globally oppose (see Krizsan and Roggeband 2021), the Greens/EFA political group speech stated: "Every third woman in the European Union experiences violence in her life. This might seem like an abstract number, but out of 280 women in this Chamber, approximately 90 would have been those who experienced violence in their lives" (Terry Reintke; PV 23/11/2016 - 14). Similarly, the Greens/EFA political group speech provides knowledge about women's sexual and reproductive rights to debunk anti-gender frames: "To those on the right of the House, I would say this: it is simply untrue constantly to claim that asking for sexual and reproductive rights is promoting abortion. The exact opposite is true. Asking for sexual and reproductive rights means giving women back the power over their own bodies. It means fighting against the fact that, still today, 68000 women die in unsafe and illegal abortions each year." (Terry Reintke; A8-0163/2015).

In sum, the analysis illustrates the central role of knowledge responses for countering anti-gender politics at the individual and political group level. Analysis of the plenary debates showed the importance of countering with knowledge and facts far-right populist misinformation.

FEMINIST COALITION-BUILDING RESPONSES

Coalition-building is another feminist response identified in our research material. Individual young women MEPs employed *blue-cards* as a basis for loose coalition-building against anti-gender politics. Blue-cards are a practice in EP's plenary debates whereby an MEP can raise a card while another MEP is talking to make a direct intervention on the topic. The aim is to make the

debate livelier and more engaging than otherwise would be the case. Far-right, however, employs blue-cards to attack women's, homosexual, racialized minorities' rights through hateful speech and to divert attention from gender equality issues debated in plenaries. One staff member from the liberal Renew group explained in an interview how young women MEPs constructed a strategy to use blue-cards "as much as possible in order to refer to each other and, and then they sat in the front so you could see them together" (Renew Staff M 130320). Their aim was to change the culture of the plenary debates, also in the context of far-right and anti-gender politics. The interviewee notes too how, ironically, both the far right and the young women use the same strategy (blue-card interventions) for partly the same purpose (to liven up the debate) (Renew Staff M 130320).

Coalition-building exists not just at the individual but also at the political group level. The informal institutional practice of *cordon sanitaire*, which closed off far-right populists from policymaking and key positions in the parliament (Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019), is an example of coalition-building strategy. In this respect, the interviewees described how political groups built coalitions to counter anti-gender politics in the parliament. One interviewee from the Renew group described how coalition-building can eliminate the far-right from certain leadership positions in the parliament (Renew MEP F 040320). Another one said that whilst she did not want to have any contact with the "right extremists" this did not always apply to the Italian Five Stars Movement (M5S) from the EFDD political group. Sometimes MEPs from other groups agreed that one of them had to call to the 12 moderate MEPs from this populist party to ensure their support for some gender equality policy where the vote was tight (S&D MEP F 060320).

Coalition-building responses are used at the parliamentary level too. The FEMM committee is a site of parliamentary coalition-building for individual MEPs and political groups. In the FEMM committee, there is a strong front against anti-gender politics based on coalitions between the other political groups (EPP Staff F 060320; S&D Staff M 040320). As put by one Greens/EFA MEP: "The FEMM Committee is very homogeneous in its mind-thinking, apart from the ID people. These will be the only ones, even the ECR people in FEMM are very, very close to us on many topics" (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320). One member of political staff from Renew described to us the role of cordon sanitaire in the FEMM committee:

> "In terms of negotiating compromises, say for example we did the resolution on FGM, it's super consensual, even the ECR were actually, were involved with us on that one. Normally we don't work with the ECR at all on FEMM. They're anti-choice, they're anti-LGBTI. We just, we don't work with them. But, as it happened, the member they appointed, was a survivor of FGM so I guess she had brought a different perspective to her group, so there we could work with them." (Renew Staff F 040320)

The problem is according to her that the FEMM committee members' views and coalitions on gender equality and defending it are representative of the Committee but not of their groups and this results in different voting outcomes in the plenaries, especially for Renew and the EPP (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320).

Whilst the variety of responses in relation to coalition building is more limited than for the knowledge responses, coalition-building emerges as a means to respond to anti-gender politics. Interestingly, it reveals the existence of actors' strategic organizing. Be it through the strategic use of the Parliament's practice of blue-cards by individual women MEPs, the informal practice of

cordon sanitaire by political groups, or alliances within the FEMM Committee, coalitions are intentionally built to respond to the challenge of anti-gender politics.

FEMINIST RULE-MAKING RESPONSES

The analysis of plenary debates and interviews allowed us to discern an additional feminist response: "rule-making". This includes the adoption of formal rules by the Parliament, the use and monitoring of respect of informal rules by political groups, and the sanctioning of rules violation.

The European Parliament as an institution has used its powers and policy-tools to counter anti-gender politics to gender equality. It has for example adopted resolutions to respond to anti-gender politics that explicitly put "backlash" on the political agenda, defining it as "resistance to progressive social change, regression on acquired rights or maintenance of a non-egalitarian status quo" (resolution on *Experiencing a backlash in women's rights and gender equality in the EU* 2018/2684(RSP)). It condemns the action of specific governments against LGBTIQ* people's rights, as in the resolution on *Public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people, including LGBTI free zones in Poland* (2019/2933(RSP)). It denounces the significant influence that opponents of sexual and reproductive rights have had on policy "with retrogressive initiatives taken in several Member States, seeking to undermine SRHR" (*EP resolution on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU* (2020/2215(INI)). These resolutions, while reacting to specific anti-gender challenges, also make proposals calling on the European Commission to monitor and intervene the use of EU structural funds for discriminatory purposes (2019/2933(RSP)), to strengthen gender institutions through a dedicated Council on gender

equality (2020/2896(RSP)), and advocating the Council and member states to ratify the Istanbul Convention and other measures to combat gender-based violence (2019/2855(RSP)), and unblock the gender and antidiscrimination directives (2018/2684(RSP)). Responses that make proactive proposals for strengthening EU gender institutions and policies tend to construct gender equality as indicator of the quality of democracy and hence a crucial component of European democracies (2018/2684(RSP)).

A key response to anti-gender politics adopted at the parliamentary level is establishing formal rules for preventing abusive practices. A clear example is the so-called Corbett report on EP rules of procedures that was adopted in plenary (Amendment of the EP Rules of Procedure P8TA(2019)0046). The Corbett report codified rules to respond to practices of hateful speech by far-right MEPs and cases of sexual harassment reported in the EP (Berthet and Kantola 2020). Rules prescribed that MEPs "shall not resort to offensive language" such as "defamatory language, 'hate speech' and incitement to discrimination based, in particular, on any ground referred to in Article 21" (11.3c), and they "shall refrain from any type of psychological or sexual harassment" and "respect the Code of appropriate behaviour for Members of the European Parliament" (11.3e). MEPs must commit to respect this code of conduct in a written declaration and might be barred from key positions as rapporteur or representing the Parliament in a trilogue or an official delegation if they refuse to sign (Berthet and Kantola 2020).

Changes to the rules of procedure constitute a response that proactively constructs a more gender-inclusive and democratic parliamentary arena. Prescribing women's descriptive representation ("The diversity of Parliament must be reflected in the composition of the bureau of each

committee; it shall not be permissible to have an all-male or all-female bureau or for all of the Vice-Chairs to come from the same Member State." 204.1) and adopting a new Rule 228a on gender mainstreaming and gender action plans for the whole parliament is a crucial strategy to institutionally counteract anti-gender practices and create a more inclusive context.

At the political group level, rule-making responses also include the use of informal rules and monitoring of respect for such rules through internal work within the political group to train MEPs and staff or to undertake disciplinary action against those opposing gender equality in plenary votes. Of the political groups, the S&D interviewees mentioned these institutional responses. The non-engagement with "extremist xenophobic groups" was mentioned as an "unofficial strategy" of the group (S&D Staff M 260220). The S&D had an internal working group on far-right populism. It also activated disciplinary action by the group against MEPs who vote anti-LGBTIQ* in the S&D group, calling them to an internal talk for voting against the group (S&D MEP F 060320). This monitoring of respect for informal rules is aimed at developing cohesive behaviours in support of gender equality and articulating a stronger response to far-right attacks on gender. Some of the interviewees suggested that other groups were complacent and did not take the threat posed by far-right MEPs seriously enough (S&D Staff F 140220).

Sanctioning the violation of rules is a response that reveals the "rules in use" (Gains and Lowndes 2022) in the institution, as shows the intervention of the President of the Parliament in the behaviour of some far-right politicians using the possibilities granted by the parliamentary rules of procedure. For instance, an EPP woman MEP said in an interview that the sanctions against inappropriate behaviour, including withholding daily allowances to MEPs, are "very strict", much

more than in her national parliament (EPP MEP F 100320). Illustrative here are the parliament's sanctions on the MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke (NI) for his overtly misogynistic comment that interrupted the speech of S&D Iratxe García (P8_CRE-REV(2017)03–01(19) to argue that "women must earn less than men because they are weaker, they are smaller, they are less intelligent". Parliament's penalties withheld temporarily the MEP's right to receive daily subsistence allowance and the participation in parliamentary activities. Although the European Court of Justice annulled the sanction as inappropriate in the name of freedom of expression of the MEP[1], the parliament as an institution proved prompt to use its rules to counteract opposition to gender equality in the form of hate speech.

In sum, rule-making responses to anti-gender politics allowed us to discern institutional action formal and informal rules against discrimination and hateful speech, to adopt them, monitor their respect, and sanction violations. Gendering the rules of the parliament shows the relevance of institutional responses for proactively making the EP a more inclusive and democratic institution. Applying gender rules also involves disciplinary actions by pro-equality political groups against their members who expressed oppositional views to gender equality.

FEMINIST EVERYDAY PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT RESPONSES

When analyzing the debates and interview data, we discerned new types of feminist responses that concerned everyday practices of interaction within the parliamentary setting which were neither knowledge-based or coalitional, nor related to rule-making: "everyday pragmatic engagement"

[1] https://www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/news/no-penalty-for-mep-korwin-mikke-ecj-rules/

responses. For example, some feminist actors described practices by which they actively ignored the presence of far-right populists in the parliament, choosing to not engage with them. This is exemplified by a citation from an S&D staff member interview, which discussed the launch of the *Women in Brexit* report and the conscious decision not to invite the "far right" and the Brexit Party because of their bad manners:

> "For our events we intentionally didn't invite them. Because I was thinking, on one hand it's good to have a healthy debate, on the other hand, because of the fact that they don't really come to debate, they come here to, shout a bunch of rhetoric, film it and then leave, it would just become quite disruptive … I think that we didn't make a massive attempt to engage with them, and they didn't really show any engagement with us either." (S&D Staff F 020320)

We suggest that this illustrates a practice of "non-engagement" as a feminist response. This interaction response here signals situational and context-specific actions taken to counter anti-gender politics. These responses express actors' considerations about what can be done to continue working on gender policy-making while having to cope everyday with anti-gender politics. They reveal patterned, intentional organizing to limit the anti-gender politics and uses parliamentary spaces to advance on gender equality to rather oppose such policies. Everyday pragmatic engagement responses can be either principled or ad hoc. The citation above shows the aim to safeguard democratic debates from the disruptive interventions of anti-gender politics and to create safe spaces to discuss and advance on gender equality.

Our research material presents further examples of responses of everyday pragmatic engagement in the European Parliament. They are present in the ways in which women and feminist MEPs

refuse to take aforementioned blue-card questions in plenary debates from far-right populists. One of our interviewees described how many blue-cards were used by the far right in the parliamentary debates on LGBTIQ*-free-zones in Poland (Renew Staff M 130320).

Feminist interaction responses to anti-gender politics of the blue-cards vary in our data. It is up to the MEP who is speaking to either accept the blue-card intervention or decline it. Some MEPs prefer to refuse blue-card questions from anti-gender MEPs while they are defending gender equality, to avoid provocative attempts to distract from the main topic of the gender equality debate and bring it to their own anti-gender politics. Other MEPs do the opposite and use the blue-card response as an opportunity to explain the public the relevance of gender equality and the inclusionary values of the EU project. In the EP debate on women refugees (CRE 08/03/2016 – 5), Iratxe García (S&D) responds to an Islamophobic blue-card that questioned Muslim people's capacity to integrate in Europe by contending: "Islam is not incompatible with the European Union. European Union is diversity, plurality, and difference. And there are European citizens that practice this religion: Islam. (...) Therefore, the problem is not Islam. The problem is intolerance, lack of solidarity, and lack of awareness that this is a project of all". The practice of accepting blue-cards can be distracting but also clarifying.

In sum, parliamentary practices, such as blue-cards, offered a basis for identifying responses of everyday pragmatic engagement. A range of practices can come into play. These include individual politicians' choices to not engage with anti-gender actors' comments and behavior in parliamentary contexts, in some cases by intentionally deciding not to invite them to gender equality events. Alternatively, politicians defending gender equality have also used parliamentary

contexts and practices for political debate to explain better the relevance and meanings of gender equality for the public and for putting forward alternative visions of a more egalitarian and democratic society.

CONCLUSIONS

The rise of anti-gender politics in parliaments calls for understanding not only the phenomenon of anti-gender but also that of feminist responses to anti-gender politics aimed at safeguarding parliaments as democratic arenas for the advancement of gender equality. Our analysis introduces "knowledge" and "coalition-building" categories, mostly based on feminist theories, to respectively grasp the envisioned project of equality and democracy that feminist responses embed and the organized coalition practices. We also define the categories of "rule-making" and "everyday pragmatic engagement" responses, identified inductively from our empirical analysis and then theoretically supported. Both categories allow accounting for the institutional parliamentary context in which responses are articulated, respectively through the making, monitoring and sanctioning of formal and informal rules, and the everyday engaging (or not) of feminist actors with anti-gender actors with whom they share parliamentary spaces.

All these strategies might work together. Knowledge is key in responding to anti-gender hegemony-seeking politics, unmasking their anti-democratic project of society, providing evidence about gender inequalities and proposing feminist democratic projects. Rule-making and coalition-building responses ground on knowledge about the anti-gender project as pernicious for gender equality and democracy. Making, monitoring and sanctioning respect for gender equality

rules at the institutional and political group levels can help develop cohesive behaviours in support of gender equality and build stronger coalitions in response to anti-gender opposition. Practices of coalition developed through the individual use of blue-cards, in the FEMM committee, and through political groups' *cordon sanitaire* can help sharing knowledge, constructing and enacting gender equality rules, and developing practices of everyday engagement with anti-gender actors.

Feminist responses can amplify one another, but individual responses need the support of parliamentary and political group's support to address the antigender challenge. This support is affected by internal power struggles within and between the parliamentary groups and the parliament. The relevance and use of feminist responses are context dependent. Rulemaking on the part of the institution is fundamental to fix rules, monitor and sanction their respect in the whole parliament. Yet, in parliaments that lack formal rules on gender equality and against hate speech, constructing knowledge and building informal coalitions might acquire greater relevance for counteracting anti-gender attacks.

Feminist responses to anti-gender politics can be *reactive* or *proactive*. They can react by introducing rules against hate speech and condemning the action of specific governments against women and LGBTIQ* people's rights, or proactively construct alternative feminist knowledge and politics, mainstream gender and intersectionality in policymaking, or gender political representation. While studies on gender mainstreaming in international institutions have shown practices of "strategic ambiguity" (Eyben 2010) to "sell" gender policies to resistant departments, the anti-gender context pushes feminist parliamentarians to articulate more explicitly what gender equality means, with interesting potential for feminist knowledge transfer to citizens and

politicians.

The concepts developed in this article are potentially applicable to other parliaments as well and hence our findings reach beyond the specific context of the European Parliament. Such studies could add not only empirical insights about feminist institutional responses but also lead to further conceptual development. New questions could be raised too about the prevalence and effectiveness of such responses through comparative research on parliaments and other institutions. Research could further assess the constraints and opportunities for feminist institutional activism and democratic resilience of the European Parliament. While anti-gender opposition is pushing the European Parliament to react to unequal practices such as hate speech by reforming its rules of procedure, proactive institutional responses are also needed to construct feminist politics and support feminist actors, so to not only safeguard but also strengthen democracy and equality in the parliament.

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