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Friends, Experts, or Witches: Doing Feminist Research in Challenging Political Context

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Abstract

The article explores methodological and ethical tensions arising from positionality and reflexivity while doing feminist research in a challenging parliamentary setting, specifically one that includes radical right populist actors that use anti-gender rhetoric. Reflecting upon positionality is vital for qualitative researchers, especially those engaged in critical feminist research where gendered power hierarchies between researchers and their environment demand daily manoeuvring and subsequent analytical concern. We explore how the gender of the researchers, gender equality as a research topic, our feminist positionalities, and intersectional aspects shaped the research process in the context of the European Parliament. The article contributes to the literature on feminist positionalities and reflexivity by discussing ambiguities emerging from our empirical research choices, such as engaging with radical right actors, but also the other 'critical ingredients' that feminism handles, such as identities, relationships, power, and affects, reflecting how they are interwoven with relationships and interactions in the field.

Key words

feminist research, researcher positionality, parliaments, (opposition to) gender equality, European Parliament

Key messages

- We investigate the implications of feminist research in an elite parliamentary setting.
- Navigating the grey areas and ambiguities of the research-participant relationship requires reflection and (re)negotiation of own positionalities.
- Navigating the intersection of being a feminist, researching gender issues and including oppositional participants required constant reflection on our positionality.

Introduction

Researcher positionality in the field is of vital methodological concern for academics, especially those engaged in critical feminist research (Ackerly and True 2018; 2019; Fujii 2017). Qualitative research involves the continuous negotiation of gendered power hierarchies between researchers and their environment, requiring sensitivity and analytical reflexivity (Boucher 2017; Fujii 2017). The article draws on experiences from a qualitative study we conducted comprising semi-structured interviews, parliamentary ethnography, and documentary analysis of policies and practices of the political groups in the European Parliament (EP) (Berthet et al. 2023). Early on in our project, one of our prospective interviewees declined our interview invitation, claiming that he did not engage with 'witchcraft' and only responded to 'real scientific' requests. The reaction speaks to the reframing of gender equality and feminism as 'gender ideology', a strategy regularly used by radical right populist parties (Kováts 2018; Kováts & Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). For us as a research team, this raised important questions about access to indispensable data and the dispositions of political actors to collaborate with scientists more broadly, but also spoke to our feminist[1] normative stance during fieldwork and our interactions with actors holding sometimes diametrically opposing political views.

While qualitative research is common in EU and parliamentary studies, we still know little about methodological considerations regarding positionality and reflexivity during data collection (but see Childs and Challender 2019; Busby 2014; Holmes et al. 2019; Wiesner and Eggeling 2023). The article fills this gap by engaging with positionality and reflexivity through the lens of power relations and gendered interactions between researchers and research participants in the EP.

By illustrating our team research process, we provide important lessons for EU scholars aiming to conduct qualitative research in the EP or other parliaments, who are confronted with issues of adjusting their research process to diverse participants that react to researchers by categorising them as friends, experts, or witches.

[1] We acknowledge that there is no 'one' feminism. In our own understanding of feminism, we follow an intersectional feminist perspective, meaning that oppressions related to gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and class are deeply intertwined and produce structures and patterns of exclusion that feminism challenges. Moreover, the team was united in an understanding of feminist research as studying the complexity of gendered power relations in politics and society, committed to transform the unequal structures that we are part of (see also Ackerly and True 2018).

We employ reflexivity to explore the tensions created by our positionality and our relationships with interviewees that are embedded in various rules, norms, and ideologies. Importantly, the tensions arise from the positionality as women and through the ideological disposition as feminists. Our findings shed light on undertaking research in the challenging context of incorporating radical right populist actors who use anti-gender rhetoric as a core aspect of their mobilisation (Bellè 2016). We ask what are the methodological implications of doing feminist research in an elite parliamentary setting that requires including participants antagonistic to feminism? How do dynamics around researcher positionality, reflexivity, and trust interact with gender equality as a research topic in the European Parliament?

In recent election cycles, the number of radical right populists (RRP) increased considerably in the EP, and extant research demonstrated how they oppose gender equality in multiple ways (Berthet 2022; Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Zacharenko 2020). This poses several challenges to researchers, feminist or otherwise and our contribution illuminating these is twofold. First, we explore gender biases we faced during fieldwork, giving a 'thick description' (Freeman 2014; Geertz 1973) of the multidimensional positionality aspects in the research field. Extant literature demonstrates that researchers face gendered issues during data collection: from gendered assumptions held by research participants (Abels and Behrens 2009; Boucher 2017) because of the researchers' own biases when developing surveys, questionnaires, entering the field, or by interacting with participants during qualitative studies (Ackerly and True 2019; Fujii 2017; Lareau 2022; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2013). Research to-date depicted a range of issues, *inter alia*: belittling junior researchers; questioning the qualifications and competencies of women and other marginalised groups; inappropriate behaviour (Abels and Behrens 2009; Sarikakis 2003); issues we explain later in the article. We elaborate on how the gender of the researchers, gender equality as a research topic, our feminist positionalities, and intersectional aspects shaped the research process in the EP context. The literature on feminist positionalities and reflexivity gains depth as we examine the methodological ambiguities that emerged because of our empirical research choices, such as engaging with radical right actors.

Secondly, we research gender issues in political institutions, specifically the EP, which required us going beyond gender experts and include experts who were not engaged (and often not interested) in gender issues (Chappell 2020; Childs and Challender 2019; Chappell and Mackay

2021). Here, our study differs from most research on gender equality, which usually involves speaking with critical (feminist) actors, or more broadly the institutional gender equality machinery and women's movements inside and outside the state (McBride and Mazur 2010). As illustrated above, we also encountered actively engaged 'anti-gender' actors. Yet, managing to include such actors - despite their often-immediate rejection - was crucial for successful data collection discussed in this article. Therefore, we focus on doing feminist research in parliament, by including *all* parliamentary actors, those sympathetic and those opposed to our research agenda. We are attentive to what this means related to our positionality and reflexivity as researchers, and to other core aspects of conducting research in the field like transparency, trust, and related ambiguities. Thus, we contribute to the literature by exploring feminist researcher positionality vis-à-vis radical right populists and dealing with trust issues and discomfort in the field.

We begin by presenting the EP as a research context and summarising the methods and methodologies to engage with researcher-participant interactions, particularly from a feminist perspective, and how we applied them in the research process. Next, we describe our methods, the research design and how we engaged with feminist research principles previously outlined. Thereafter, the core aspects of doing gender equality research are analysed: trust and transparency, and the ambiguities of positionality and reflexivity showing how they played out in our research process. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of the discussed themes for feminist research.

European Parliament - a challenging elite setting

The European Parliament provides several challenges for qualitative feminist research such as ours. It could be characterised as an 'equality parliament' because of its high number of women parliamentarians (around 40 percent at present) and its often-progressive gender policies and statements which also reach beyond gender equality to cover anti-racism or LGBTQI rights. The European Parliament has an effective feminist governance structure through a dedicated committee for gender equality (FEMM Committee), and a commitment to gender mainstreaming which help in gendering policies (Ahrens 2019; Elomäki and Ahrens 2022).

Furthermore, the European Parliament is a 'working parliament' as opposed to a 'debating parliament' (Lord 2018; Miller 2022), which means that its culture is geared towards cooperation and collaboration rather than partisanship. This facilitates engaging with participants from different political parties because it lacks a clear government-opposition dynamic with pro-European political parties striking deals and coalitions across partisan divides. Concomitantly, networking is key to being a successful parliamentarian in the EP, and notably, a *cordon sanitaire* blocks off radical right populist parliamentarians from these practices (Brack 2018; Ripoll Servent and Panning 2021).

The European Parliament has 705 MEPs (after Brexit) from 27 member states and comprises nearly 200 national political parties, who sit in seven different political groups covering ideologies from left, social democratic, green, and liberal to conservative, nationalist, radical right populist and far right. The GAL (Greens, Alternatives, Libertarians) versus TAN (Traditionalists, Authoritarians, Nationalists) axis also cuts across some of these groups (Hooghe et al. 2002), which makes them internally diverse and contradictory, for example, regarding gender equality or LGBTQI rights (Ahrens et al. 2021). The parliament is also multilingual with 24 official languages spoken and officially translated (Ringe 2022).

Some challenges for qualitative research are like those faced by researchers in national parliaments. All parliaments are elite institutions with an in-built hierarchy[2] between parliamentarians and others, such as personal assistants of the MEPs, or researchers, particularly those in the early stages of their career (Sarikakis 2003; Abels and Behrens 2009). Other challenges are unique to the European Parliament. For instance, the diversity of languages and cultures means that many MEPs do not necessarily speak good English and researchers need to have the willingness, skills, and resources to translate collected data materials (e.g., invitation emails, questionnaires, informed consent forms) and conduct interviews in other languages.

The diversity of member state gender regimes poses additional challenges for feminist research as they reflect different understandings of the role of the state or civil society in advancing gender

[2] Other hierarchies are those between MEPs from Western and Eastern member states which tend to 'reproduce the center–periphery divide in which anything other than the West and its modernity is deemed an imitation or catching-up' (Lewicki 2020: 4; see also Mueller 2020).

equality, and the role and extent of social policy or markets (cf. Walby 2020). For example, regarding gender-based violence, feminists in some countries prefer to provide shelters and support the victims from within civil society and autonomously from the state; whilst in others, there is an assumption that the state needs to provide these services and does it neutrally and professionally (Kantola 2006). In thorny prostitution/sex work debates, too, some feminists and member states criminalise buying sex, whilst others approach prostitution as work (Erikson and Larsson 2022). EP debates on gender equality are shaped by such differences. For feminist research, they pose the challenge that different concepts used in research - such as gender, feminism, equality, intersectionality, racism - mean different things for interviewees from different national contexts.

The influx of Eurosceptic, radical right populist, and far-right parties especially since 2014 has added an additional political texture, making the EP even more polarised on feminism and gender equality in plenary debates and other venues. One study estimated that about one third of parliamentarians opposed 'gender equality' after the 2019 European Parliament elections, and not all belonged to right-leaning political groups, but also 'centrist' ones (Zacharenko 2020). As we discuss below, the increasing number of radical right populists and their open opposition to 'gender' or 'feminism', has an impact on the climate for conducting feminist research in the parliament (Kantola and Lombardo 2021).

Challenges of researcher-participant interactions when researching parliaments

Qualitative interpretive research in parliaments posits legislatures as specific settings (Benoît and Rozenberg 2020; Childs and Challender 2019; Cowley 2021; Puwar 1997). Researchers struggle with problems like trust, transparency, and their own positionality that become ever more important when faced with opposing interviewees (Lancaster 2017; Swain 2002) or when 'studying up' (Holmes et al. 2019), as we also realised in our study. While studies of EU integration and the EP are rich, we quickly found out that extant research seldom reflects on such methodological challenges (but see Berthet et al. 2023; Busby 2014; Wiesner and Eggeling 2023).

Overall, researcher-participant interactions and different aspects of identity (gender, race, age, etc.) along with professional status shape data collection and analysis. Therefore, scholars need to attend to this not only in preparing but also throughout the research process, especially with regards to

elite interviewing or ethnographies (Fujii 2017; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2013) and radical right populist actors (Blee 2007; Deodhar 2021). For instance, sociodemographic matching (e.g. gender, race) is common in household surveys (e.g. Davis et al. 2013) and was also strategically used in cases where gender and race could impede data collection (Swain 2002). Then again and as we will illustrate below, 'noncongruence' between researchers and participants does not necessarily impede data collection and analysis, if 'a reflexive perspective on how the researcher is "read" in the field is integrated in the process', which requires closeness to participants and starting from a position of empathy (not sympathy) (Deodhar 2021, p. 557, 560-61; see also Blee 2007).

With a lack of engagement with these questions in EU and parliamentary studies, the contributions made by feminist research are crucial. When discussing methodological issues, feminist researchers discern several challenges. A core aspect is gender biases and generally biases towards marginalised groups that often impact research settings (Ackerly and True 2019; Ahmed 2012; Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Puwar 2004). Chappell and Mackay (2021, p. 330), suggest intersectional and decolonial approaches to institutional engagement (see also Ackerly and True 2020, p. 229). Feminist research should attend to the position of 'outsiders within' rather than taking a scathing approach to the institution as a unitary whole (Chappell and Mackay 2021). These central concepts and premises from feminist debates, namely, trust, transparency, positionality, and reflexivity guided our research, and we discuss them further in our methods section and analysis below. Together they crystallised as our core challenges, each requiring different preparation and implementation depending on who we interacted with: gender experts as 'critical friends' (Appleton 2011; Holvikivi 2019), participants without further gender expertise, anti-gender actors from various parties or radical right populists.

Feminist literature points to 'trust' as a vital aspect of interactions between researchers and their subjects (Chappell and Mackay 2021; Chappell 2020). According to Brown (2012) and following our experiences, trust is critical in ensuring that interviewees feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives. Brown (2012) notes that in many cases, interviewees may feel vulnerable or hesitant to discuss sensitive topics, making it the responsibility of the interviewer to create a safe and welcoming environment. However, according to Chappell (2020, p. 132), while trust is important, it is hard to gain. Establishing a relationship of trust during an interaction which might potentially last only 30 minutes is a challenge (Chappell 2020). Steps to establish trust may

include explaining the research objectives, obtaining informed consent, confidentiality, and being transparent.

Full transparency and informing about details, while an important ethical consideration, may also impede the research process. Subjects can become 'hyper-alert' when engaging with gender researchers (Chappell 2020, p. 131). For studying parliaments and parties, similar challenges may exist when too much detailed information leads participants to answer with empty political phrases instead of an open narrative. The obverse can also occur if feminist researchers themselves pre-empt opposition to gender equality by hiding their specialisation.

The second dynamic from the literature concerns the positionalities of feminist researchers, especially in elite settings like parliaments (Childs and Challender 2018; Holmes et al. 2019). The broader qualitative research literature urges researchers to critically reflect about power and positionality and the epistemic consequences for research, advising not to engage in a 'shopping list positionality' (Folkes 2022), where the addition of positionality categories becomes synonymous with reflexivity.

Crucially, taking a feminist positionality also brings out pertinent affective and power dynamics in parliament. The 'critical friends' literature points to an external person who is often embedded in parliaments or receives collaboration to help gender justice advocates (Chappell and Mackay 2021, p. 323; Appleton 2011; Holvikivi 2019). Whilst Chappell and Mackay (2021) note that career status may affect the nature of the collaboration, less is mentioned about racialised academic actors and their experience of the research interaction. For example, during long-term fieldwork in Brussels, Firat (2019, p. 50) found that her uncovered hair prompted discussions in Brussels about whether Turkish women cover their hair or not.

A feminist positionality can also elicit strong responses within parliaments. Ahmed notes that feminism is an unwelcome force and can cause provocations (2017, p. 21), whilst Childs experienced resistance to her efforts of change in the UK Parliament when undertaking a gender sensitive parliamentary review (Childs 2016; Childs and Challender 2018). Others have noted a growing consciousness of sexist research interactions 'very early' in the fieldwork (Sarikakis 2003, p. 469). This works to cultivate a feminist positionality and can affect the direction of research and research outputs: 'One of the first observations I was forced to make during archive research and

interviews were the subtly different ways in which I was treated, compared to my male colleagues' (Sarikakis 2003, p. 469).

In sum, doing feminist research when the research setting includes non-feminist and anti-feminist actors can be especially challenging. Scholars have discussed 'the unsayable secret', noting the challenge to feminist researchers of hiding an aspect of their identity when engaging with radical right populists, to preserve a good relationship of trust and friendliness needed for the good conduct of the research (Bellè 2016). Self-censorship may also occur in such instances and includes removing words like 'feminism' or 'gender' from the research description when recruiting participants.

Extant research thus points to the challenges of establishing trust and credibility in the field; being transparent in research interactions with participants; and the resultant issues if the above factors are 'compounded' by researchers' positionalities vis-à-vis those of the participants. This article, therefore, is a reflexive and nuanced account of the ambiguities we encountered across these dynamics during our research process.

Methodological approach

Examining the methodological implications of doing feminist research in the EP including RRP actors required engaging with our data, comprising multiple intertwined sources from all phases of our research process, through a meta-level analysis. Metalevel data in this context means that collecting data on tensions of positionality and reflexivity while doing feminist research was not the research topic, but rather a by-product of the research process. Data extracted for this article emerged via the proactive and continuous reflection and engagement with interview situations and interactions, with interview settings and locations, through team research processes and related discussions, and a parliamentary ethnography embedded in the broader research process (Berthet et al. 2023; Miller 2022). Much of the material was triggered by reflecting on the inclusion of participants from RRP political groups and how – as feminist researchers – to engage with them given our own positionality.

The research started with a pilot phase to test interview questionnaires and the setting of the ethnography[3]. During this phase, team members took notes on which interview questions were helpful, which needed revision and which additional questions were necessary. The adjustments concerned, for instance, incomprehensible questions (resulting in a reflection on using terms that were too academic) or questions needing flexible formulations depending on who was interviewed, e.g. rephrasing a question to RRP interviewees on the *cordon sanitaire* (Brack 2018; Ripoll Servent and Panning 2021).

During the pilot and the main data collection phases, all team members conducted interviews individually and one team member carried out the parliamentary ethnography and interviews. The research team continuously reflected upon the assumptions about the research process, interviewee' positionalities, or expectable researcher-interviewee interactions; a posture speaking to 'active reflexivity' (Soedirgo and Glas 2020). Core elements we dealt with through 'active reflexivity' during our dynamic research process are discussed in the empirical section below. More generally, and based on the ongoing research process, we discussed regularly whether questionnaires needed to be adjusted (a) considering recent political developments (including EP elections and the pandemic), (b) given team members' focus on different gender topics (e.g., different policies, practices, or mobilisations around specific issues). We also debated who should send initial interview invitations, e.g. selectively whether senior team members should contact leadership instead of junior ones to match positions of power.

The continuous team dialogue helped to capture nuances and to sensitise us to previously situated knowledge and positionality of team members (Ackerly and True 2018, p. 261; Lareau 2022, pp. 27-29, 151). Because all research team members self-identified as feminists, reflexivity, and a consideration of our own positionality in the field were core concerns throughout our research process (Ackerly and True 2018; 2019; Brown 2012). The team comprised six white cis women researchers at different career stages (from doctoral student to professor level), belonging to ethnic majority groups in their respective home countries (Finland, France, Germany, Poland, United Kingdom) and the EU more broadly. Such aspects of our identities affected interactions and

[3] Human subject research for this article was reviewed and approved by Tampere University, Finland. Research documentation is openly available at https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-39808-7

encounters with interviewees in different ways (as detailed below). Our identities impacted what our interviewees were willing to tell us and thus shaped our data and the knowledge claims we can make (Shehata 2014). Contrary to Swain (2002), we did not discuss hiring an additional interviewer (for instance, a white middle-aged man) to conduct selected interviews with RRP interviewees and potentially attenuate caution and confrontation because we considered deep immersion and the team process core to data collection.

Our metalevel approach to data originated from what Ackerly and True (2018, p. 39) labelled as a 'dynamic research process': an iterative process of recording, transcribing, coding, and reflecting on elite interviewing and ethnography while the research process continued. Essentially, the coding process was circulating between reading, coding, and thinking about the raw material allowing us to revise the code list and investigate new research questions that emerged from the data (Berthet et al. 2023). Our meta-data listed below did not primarily aim to capture the positionality of feminist researchers in parliament studies. Instead, it emerged from the process of immersing ourselves into the metadata and recalibrating our research questions, objectives, and code list.

Our material from the 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 EP terms comprised:

- 140 semi-structured interviews (30-120 minutes; transcribed) with all political groups (including MEPs, also the non-attached, their assistants, political group staff and EP administration) and a good gender balance.
- 1-2 page-long post-interview reflection notes covering setting (location, waiting time, office style, dress code), atmosphere (interviewee mood, emotional situations), interactions (researcher-interviewee, welcome/goodbye), and affects (researcher mood after interview).
- Ethnographic fieldnotes (193 pages), including an observation schedule, amounting to 55 days (440 hours) in the field.

In several workshops, the team developed and revised the code list, among them the codes analysed for this article: (1) Researcher role code, defined as reactions during the interviews to us as researchers and (2) the Gendered interaction code, covering gender-related behaviours during the interview between interviewees, between the interviewee and the researcher, or between the interviewee and their staff. These gendered interactions shed light on the internal dynamics and power relations in the EP, a male-dominated setting. It included patronising comments,

'mansplaining', or unsolicited feedback on the research or on how the interview was conducted. These codes were added to the code list inductively, after identifying them early on as cross-cutting themes during the coding process. For this article, we have extracted the two codes from the coded data (interviews, post-interview reflection notes, and ethnographic fieldnotes) and we reflect on the methodological implications of positionality and reflexivity when doing feminist research in a gendered parliamentary setting.

Witchcraft or Real Science: Experiences from the Field

The following sections analyse the 'critical ingredients' that feminism handles, such as gender equality as a topic, identities, relationships, power, and affects, reflecting on how they affected our relationships and interactions in the field. We specifically address the ambiguities that were encountered in all the sections of analysis, resulting from time constraints, language, and cultural differences[4].

Gender Equality as Research Topic

The EP context as an 'equality parliament' with a historically progressive trajectory in its policies, rules, and practices (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín 2019) was also apparent in the way interviewees responded and reacted. In our interviews with EPP[5], S&D[6], Renew[7], Greens/EFA[8], the Left[9], and EP staff, the degree of direct opposition to gender equality varied, and we rarely encountered blunt and open rejections of our research on gender issues 'to our face'. The typical reactions to our research on gender equality can be broadly divided into (1) treating us as 'feminist critical friends' (Chappell and Mackay 2021), (2) considering us as critical external experts on

[4] Broader phenomena such as the Covid-19 pandemic also impacted the research process (see Berthet et al. 2023 for details).
[5] European People's Party
[6] Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
[7] Renew Europe group
[8] Greens/European Free Alliance
[9] The Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL

gender equality in the EP and the political group, and (3) demonstrating opposition to us, to gender issues and gender equality.

In the first category, interviewees expressed relief to 'get off my chest the way I feel [about equalities]' (Interview 1). Others asked us if we were 'in touch with (…) the "circle" of feminist policy actors in Brussels' (Interview 2), 'wanted to give you this time' because they were 'sensitive to your demand' (Interview 3). They also praised and followed our work in the aftermath of interviews (Ethnographic fieldnotes 1 and 2). Characteristic of this feminist 'critical friends' category was the expectation that our research would (actively) trigger future change (see also Holvikivi 2019). Similarly, interviewees expressed that the interview questions stimulated their thoughts on the topic (Interview 4). In this category, we did not always observe gender, age or status impacting researcher-participant interactions negatively, quite the opposite, our reception as feminist researchers often triggered strong commitment.

We also experienced reciprocal relationships regarding time and feminist commitments from 'critical friends'. Feminist members of the parliamentary administration turned up for interviews visibly flustered from the extra work that International Women's Day had created but were committed to helping us (Ethnographic fieldnote 3). An MEP noted: 'if an appeal comes to me that's based on sisterhood… it's the one I can't refuse. That's probably why I'm talking to you actually [laughs]' (Interview 5). Likewise, on our part, demonstrating feminist commitment required investment over time. An MEP spoke to us about her plenary activities for an extra 30 minutes because we communicated that we had been following them with interest (Interview 6).

The second category treated us as a kind of activist, albeit ones to whom they needed to defend their position and where they felt judged and evaluated. We would label most interviewees as non-gender experts (people whose job description did not include gender issues) or those objecting to gender equality measures (Ahrens and Elomäki 2022). Adopting a neutral disposition, such interviewees asked us how their group compared to others (Interview 7), some 'looked hurt and offended' when asked about (the lack of) progress (Ethnographic fieldnote 4) or pulled out of an informal chat with a defensive 'Ah, I see you're at work!' (Ethnographic fieldnote 5), whilst others suspected us of hiding our actual knowledge or of interrogating the wrong level:

> I think that this is a flawed way to frame a question. (…) The issues surrounding the topic of gender equality is not within the EU but rather our member states (Interview 8).

Instead of answering our question about gender equality in the EP, the interviewee claimed that gender equality would be a national, not a supranational matter, deducting that our research would judge him unfairly. While such reactions occurred independent of gender, age, or nationality, being perceived as feminist clearly required us to constantly assure our neutrality and non-judgemental stance and in such unexpected encounters to suppress the temptation to comment on ambiguous situations.

Interviewees in this category either expressed that they saw no problems around gender issues in the EP (Interview 9 and Ethnographic fieldnote 6) or had not read the invitation carefully and were thus uncomfortable being asked about the topic (Interview 10). We responded by, ostensibly, taking their reaction solely as lack of knowledge, repeating the questions and explaining the background in more detail; this usually led interviewees to answer, except for those that moved to category three over the course of their participation.

When organisational practices contrasted with our understanding of gender equal workplaces, more ambiguous situations arose. For instance, when an interviewee suggested contacting a colleague, the researcher reminded them this would be outside office hours, thereby insisting on respecting boundaries and work-life-balance – yet was pushed to do so, nonetheless. Improper gendered interactions also occurred: a male MEP, for example, putting his arm around a young female researcher only to quickly remove it after hearing the interview topic, or a male staff member who supported the ethnography organisationally for a long time, who asked the young female researcher (knowing her feminist research and overtly testing boundaries) to get him a coffee. Such encroaching actions appeared solely between male participants and young researchers and not with women participants or senior researchers, pointing to clearly gendered interactions. Thus, even the research topic on gender equality did not alter the extent to which interviewees performed their work ethics or how they usually behaved. For us, as feminist researchers, this created delicate and unenviable situations where we had to balance our personal commitment to feminism with the need to conduct successful data collection.

The third category of participants comprised several representatives from ECR[10], ENF[11], EFDD[12] and ID[13] who ridiculed gender issues generally and directly opposed gender equality policies. One example of this immediate rejection was the prompt email answer that inspired our article title:

> Basically, I'm only interested in real science. Gender studies, witchcraft and dowsing do not fall into this category (Email communication with an ENF MEP).

Similarly, in response to our interview invitation, an ECR MEP emailed: '[I] can talk about foreign affairs, etc (…) but [I don't] understand the topics of gender' (Interview note 11). Situations where interviewees claimed they would not understand questions on core terms like gender, equalities, or intersectionality appeared almost exclusively in interviews with RRP political groups (Interviews 12 and 13).

> I: Are equalities issues important in the ID Group more generally?
>
> R: Equalities? Can you explain the question? I'm sorry (Interview 14).

The respective interviewee had a good command of English, and answered many interview questions beforehand, making it unlikely his answer was a language issue or not knowing the interview content. Despite repeating and extending the question, the interviewee continued to assert his inability to understand before finally stating that the numbers of women and men among staff are balanced, and that ID would only recruit 'based on mostly (...) experience and merit and competence'.

In contrast to the previous category, where ambiguous situations occurred mostly unexpectedly, the third category we discussed in-depth in team meetings were the potentially uncomfortable interview situations and how to react. While such anticipation helped us to prepare, it also sometimes led to the recognition of and reflection on our own stereotypes resulting from a feminist positionality and their potential impact on the research process. We illustrate the core aspects in the following sections.

Trust and Transparency in Time- and Situation-Constrained Research Interactions

[10] The European Conservatives and Reformists group
[11] The Europe of Nations and Freedom group (2015-2019)
[12] The Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group (2014-2019)
[13] Identity and Democracy group

What stands out from our dataset was the high frequency with which our participants double-checked or even interrupted interviews to reassure themselves that what they said would be anonymised when put in writing or shared with others. There was no marked difference in levels of trust between nominally pro- or anti-equality participants; incidences of denial to record proceedings occurred with both progressive and conservative actors, with the individual concerned, and the topic discussed being a more reliable indicator. On occasion, interviewees requested that we pause the recorder so they could tell us something 'off the record' and thus not publishable, whilst some interviewees wanted to know how the material they provided would be published and when. One participant, whom we promised not to identify, expressed relief when they heard that it would take some years for the research results to be published and said: 'So I can tell this stuff now and it doesn't matter right'. Another hoped we would not publish what they said because by their own admission they were being so blunt. They said, 'I'm trusting you completely.' In contrast, one interviewee asked after the interview 'How are you gonna use this?' They said, 'I don't mind being identified. That's not an issue. It's just I don't want to be put in a bad light (...) next to X or any other names'[14]. Others admitted that they have never mentioned the things they discussed with us to anyone before.

What helped to establish trust for some participants was the reassurance that we were conducting a broad study across all political groups and multiple institutional levels in the EP. Some interviewees asked about the numbers of participants from their own political group, while others thought that larger numbers of participants from their group would further guarantee their anonymity as their voice would not 'stand out'. Some people just did not like to be recorded and our lack of insistence on this made them more comfortable in the subsequent interviews.

What our data also reveals, is the 'other side' of the trust interaction – namely our own trust or suspicion towards our subjects in our role as researchers. At times, given we vehemently opposed their politics, we were 'thrown off' or confused as to whether we should trust the interactions with radical right participants who were kind, congenial, and friendly on an interpersonal level (Interview 15).

[14] In the spirit of promises we made to certain participants, we do not identify them at all to maintain their privacy, even though all our data was anonymised.

> Because he is so apologetic, I reassure him not to worry and that it is very normal that MEPs are often slightly late. Reassurance is a methodological affect that has come up (reassuring right-leaning groups that we are not going to completely 'gut' them, or what we have seen is not *too* bad) (Ethnographic fieldnote 7).

The fieldnote demonstrates constant reflexivity and how we were acutely aware that our feminist positionality affects researcher-participant interactions. If participants appeared open and forthcoming or insecure, we tried to reassure them in the cues we used, especially if they were not using their native language (Ethnographic fieldnote 4). Admittedly our fieldnotes and interview reflection notes show that the struggles and ambiguities in how to deal with right-leaning participants were more comprehensive than those for participants from centre-left political groups.

This dissonance between feminist conceptions of 'ideal' research partners and how they ultimately behaved also played out in interview recruitment. An example is this excerpt from when an EFDD staff member, belonging to the former UKIP national party delegation[15], had taken us door-knocking down their corridor to recruit spontaneously MEPs and staff for interviews:

> I found it easier to interview these MEPs. They seemed less hierarchical – or maybe it reflected something about the content of the interviews, they are self-proclaimed outsiders of the EU institutions and less beholden/ privy to elite knowledge, which might create a hierarchical interview environment. (...) Where specifically does the hierarchy come from in an elite interview? The literature cites the academic's knowledge credentials, the participant's position and as gatekeeper, age, and seniority. But 'hierarchies' are made in encounters (Ethnographic fieldnote 7).

Such 'easier' interactions differed depending on the group but could have also been due to the UKIP MEPs being less active in the EP and having more time to participate in the interviews. Five UKIP interviews were conducted in one day; interviews at such a pace are rare but also happened with feminist participants (Brown, 2014, p. 185). The fieldnote also illustrates well components of Soedirgo and Glas' 'active reflexivity' (2020) - recording assumptions by contrasting them with extant literature, thereby routinizing and systemizing reflexivity.

[15] The UK Independence Party

Similarly to extant literature, we also found that we had more trust in participants with whom we shared some affinity, or who elicited solidarity from us because of our own positionality as a (young) woman. This included female staff members who were spoken about badly by their peers (e.g. for missing work due to illness), which made us feel uncomfortable. We had no chance of gathering a fully informed view, making us even ponder whether our intuitive loyalties were misplaced and triggered our analytical feminist angle during and after the encounter about the situational gender aspects (Ethnographic field note 8).

Some of our interviews were held in cafes or bars, either on or off the EP premises. On several occasions our participants either insisted on paying for our coffee or paid without telling us (this included both far-right ID and Left interviewees). Although it was not planned or agreed upon beforehand in any way, this created discomfort. In subsequent team exchanges, we recognized that our ethical positions considered payments of any kind as transactional (instead of voluntary) relationships and thus problematic. This became even more virulent in situations where higher placed participants left younger scholars to pay for their drink:

> [Researcher] had a coffee (interestingly [researcher] paid for the drinks, with two well paid men). When [researcher] had met with a lot of APAs lower down in the organization and less well paid, they have offered to pay, even if [researcher] has insisted: 'you're our guest' – including an ID member! (Ethnographic fieldnote 9)

In interactions with staff and secretariat, the nature of the researcher role in the field was sometimes clearer, arguably because the young researcher was considered on a similar level in the hierarchy. So, while we felt less solidarity for higher authority figures, such as leaders and supervisors, the relations with junior staff, assistants, and the secretariat were more equal and caused less concern about 'inappropriateness' (Ethnographic fieldnote 8). Paying, of course, sometimes may interact with cultural contexts and researcher characteristics, as discussed by Brown (2012), who experienced older women participants wanting to provide sustenance for her.

Ambiguities in Positionality and Reflexivity

Collectively, our interview data, notes taken directly after interviews and ethnographic field notes, illustrate how data gathering was shaped by constant (re)negotiating of researcher positionalities, and which participants we were interacting with. For us, these positions and relevant aspects of

identity ranged from being an academic with a PhD, but still perceived as young or junior; being a woman and a feminist; being a native English speaker; and finally, working from a specific country.

First, the positionality of being an academic (rather than a lobbyist or journalist) resulted in some interviewees expressing the feeling of pressure to perform, and to provide 'good' information and knowledge about the research topic. They hoped their responses were 'satisfactory' (Interview 16) and checked whether they were answering the questions correctly and in an expected way: 'Was that the sort of answer you were thinking about?' (Interview 17).

Participants assumed researchers had deep knowledge about the EP and the specific political groups: 'I'm sure that you have done your background work well, so you know that we actually as a group made history' (Interview 18). On one occasion, we were suddenly confronted with a person saying: 'let's ask the academic in the room' (Ethnographic fieldnote 10). This created a pressure to always be on top of things. Needing to know enough, yet able to balance this with asking necessary follow-up questions, and openly probing interviewees to encourage their explanations and reflections on various issues. Generally, we found that participants with academic backgrounds themselves were willing to grant interviews and to help.

At times interviewees were impressed with the researchers' knowledge of everyday politics: 'You are very painstaking. You know us very well huh?' (Interview 19). However, being an academic and thus using complex methods and concepts was often a double-edged sword (Author 2022):

> R: Talking about, you had some extraordinary word in there I had never heard of before, ethno-something-or…
>
> I: Ethnography…
>
> R: Never heard of it (Interview 13).

Conversely, using academic concepts did not necessarily resonate, even with progressive participants, as the following exchange with a male Green MEP illustrates:

> I: If you were to do our project, if you were to look at, (...) gender equality in practices and policies of the different political groups, but we also try and think about that intersectionally as well...

R: What is intersection? (Interview 20).

In both interviews, our implicit expectation that (progressive) party representatives are familiar with academic jargon was debunked, helping us to reflect on our biases. Thus, we revised interview questions to match better the EP working language and prepared ourselves to explain concepts if necessary.

Radical right MEPs drew on our academic positionality with an obvious *a priori* motivation to 'correct' both academic and political discourses. Rather than commenting on - as asked - gender equality and populism, an older, white, male MEP suddenly switched to the term racism and then constantly interrupted the young, white female researcher while presenting his own definition of racism as absolute:

> R: Do you know what racism means? You're a doctor so obviously you should know, right?
>
> I: Well, I presume that racism is…
>
> R: See, you're presuming.
>
> I: Well yeah exactly [laughs uncomfortably].
>
> R: What does it mean, because I've been called it live on TV, (...) I've been called it in a crowd of thousands of people, and it just makes me laugh because none of them know what they're saying. What does racism mean?
>
> I: I presume it's discrimination against someone based on their race.
>
> R: No, it's the belief that your race is superior to another race. I don't think I'm superior to anyone. I'm the least racist person you're ever gonna meet. (Interview 21)

Gender, race, age, and professional status fully played out in this interview, when an old, white male 'mansplained' racism, while belittling a junior researcher and questioning their qualifications and competences (Abels and Behrens 2009), while simultaneously taking advantage of them being white, too.

Overall, our positionality as cis women made us often reflect on how we were treated as researchers in the field. Sometimes, a reflex was easily invoked - that male MEPs would have behaved differently with male researchers. One MEP for example, had much insight into parliamentary leadership contributing to our scientific understanding of the roles of political groups vis-à-vis the parliament. He did not engage with interest in the research project (around

gender but also the general workings of political groups) and left female staff to 'host' us in his absence, thereby leaving us without much 'facetime' on a pre-arranged shadowing day, without explanation or acknowledgement. Ultimately, we might only gain analytical purchase on this question when male qualitative researchers, who are in comparable situations, would equally engage in providing their takes on reflexivity and positionality.

Often, the best cooperation we experienced was from the staff: 'I reflect on my helpful time with the staff and wonder if they start to become the protagonists of the story when a younger early career researcher goes in' (Ethnographic field note 11). On other occasions, with female interviewees, there were assumptions and expectations shared about what 'we, women' are.

> The cooperation between women, that's our hidden strength, isn't it? Men don't, men are wasting so much energy competing (…) whereas women are just helping each other out and cooperating. And that's why we achieve more really. (Interview 5)

Gendered interactions with participants also played out in interviews when it came to keeping time; participants dominated interview time through pauses and holding the interviewer's attention.

Interestingly, a male member of the parliamentary administration who sat in on a meeting gave us 'constructive feedback' about our interviewing style.

> [H]e asked why [the researcher] didn't talk about theory and critiqued her quietness and 'shouldn't have let him go on and on'. He felt that [the researcher] had given a disappointing performance and had failed to show off her knowledge' (Ethnographic fieldnote 9).

By this point, though, he had interacted with the researcher throughout the placement period, allowing them to share frank cynicism about power, performance, and agency in Brussels. Thus, he did not question the existence of our 'credentialled' subject knowledge but critiqued our readiness to show it off. Whilst extant research stresses the importance of demonstrating appropriate knowledge to gain the interviewee's cooperation (Cowley 2021), our encounter illustrates that even if a young woman's expertise is clear, their listening may too easily be conflated with (gender stereotyped) passivity.

This intersected on some occasions with the third positionality, that of being a feminist researcher. With some interviewees there was a sense that as fellow feminists we were 'speaking the same language' of gender equality (Interview 22). Time was both a resource and a construction of feminist commitment; it was reflected in our own research practice when, for example, we needed quickly exit from meetings to conduct an interview, or in the way time control involved a self-awareness and appreciation of MEPs' representative roles. The volume of civil society events in the EP created demands on time; a pace that sometimes resulted in a transient atmosphere.

The positionality of feminist researchers created much ambiguity when interviewing and observing radical right populists, whilst disagreeing with what they said. Listening to the replies created the ethical dilemma of remaining silent in the face of highly problematic statements.

> This was very much a more challenging meeting to support in my interactions, I felt uncomfortable (not) clapping the speakers. I did clap after the wife's video out of politeness, but I felt really uncomfortable about it (Ethnographic fieldnote 12).

Interviewees from the RRP political groups also challenged the premises of certain research concepts and theories:

> That's one of the benefits of democracy is that you see when the population is unhappy and you, politicians generally try to move to accommodate that. That's what democracy is all about. So, I have a slight... wariness of again the inference of your question… (...) about suggesting that populism is in some way... I mean populism, is that not democracy ultimately? (Interview 23).

On other occasions, we found the need to reflect on our own *a priori* assumptions towards radical right populist participants, for example, being surprised that LGBT issues, publicly strongly contested by ENF, were positively connotated in private life, albeit in a gestural form.

> Afterwards we discuss that her son has rainbow laces on his new sneakers. I personally found this to be a disturbing or jarring, that ENF are into LGBT just as equally and if not more than the average person on the street (Ethnographic fieldnote 4).

Overall, our cautious attitude towards radical right participants as potentially more challenging gradually changed during the data collection process: apart from some extreme reactions, like the

'witchcraft' answer, they were as eager (or resistant) as any other participants to share their thoughts. However, gender, age and the career stage appeared to incite inappropriate behaviour by male radical right populist MEPs more often than by other participants. On the other hand, (similarly to Swain, 2002), we expect that being white facilitated interviews with these participants.

Fourthly, the nationality of the researcher, the language the interview was conducted in, the *type* of English accent, and the location of the research project in a Northern European member state were important aspects of positionality. Nationalities and languages are important in building a rapport, gaining access to the European Parliament, and obtaining interviews. Being a fluent English speaker, however, created problems of understanding the language for some interviewees and a possible hierarchy of power. Not sharing a language created challenges to building rapport since the nuances of humour are difficult to communicate, and often get lost or misinterpreted in translation (Ethnographic fieldnote 11).

Simultaneously, the research project being based in a small Nordic EU member state created an impression of neutrality and harmlessness. We built trust with interviewees from left parties through this positionality because the project was based in a city with a strong left reputation (Interview 24). The fact that the interviewer was a national of another EU country and worked in Finland, created a familiar impression of mobile academic subjects which resonated with the lives of people in the parliament. There were many occasions for small talk about living in a country other than one's origin. A common question was: 'Tell me why did you end up in Finland doing this, and why this subject? How did it happen?' After hearing the answer, the interviewee continued 'Very interesting. Well, the European Parliament is perfect for you. It's ideal. [laughter]' (Interview 25). Our fieldnotes reflected on these intersecting positionalities and the way they were reduced to combine in the parliament: 'Apparently, I am known as "the Finnish lady"' (Ethnographic fieldnote 4).

Conclusions

We have explored the methodological implications of doing feminist research inside an elite parliamentary setting where we had to manoeuvre between being categorized as 'friends, 'critical experts' or 'witches'. While navigating grey areas and ambiguities of the research-participant

relationship and interactions inherent to qualitative research is a standard process, gaining access to and building rapport with radical right populist participants posed a specific challenge. Confronted with the different categories and interactions, we constantly reflected and (re)negotiated our own positionalities and standpoints as a result.

Whilst there exists a rich literature on feminist methodologies and the role of positionality therein (see for instance, Ackerly and True 2019; McHugh 2020; Tungohand and Catungal 2022) and a more recent deeper set of discussions on researchers' roles as 'critical feminist friends' and what it means for feminist research (Chappell and Mackay 2021; Childs 2018; Childs and Challender 2019; Holvikivi 2019), our contribution offered insights into hitherto underdeveloped methodological aspects of feminist research, particularly the complexities of research process dynamics at a conceptual level. Additionally, we discussed how to deal with participants who are not gender experts, and those who oppose gender equality.

As feminist researchers, ambiguities around *trust*, *transparency*, and *positionality* occurred most often when we interacted with anti-gender actors or radical right populists leading us to reflect constantly on whether to remain distanced and/or neutral. Then again, the need to remain neutral was sometimes also challenging when participants were considered feminist or supportive (Childs and Challender 2019).

Some situations and research pitfalls originated from more oppositional actors, but many were simply an aspect of the everyday qualitative research experience. Ensuring *transparency* and anonymity led to trust on both sides. Often not only us felt uncomfortable but probably also anti-gender and radical right populist actors, knowing they were being interviewed by their 'opponents'. How we were received was also context-specific and fluid depending on how the political groups and individual interviewees positioned themselves regarding gender equality. In contrast to extant literature, *trust* issues were less virulent, although several participants wanted to be reassured about anonymity and their expectation that there would be 'no consequences' of the interviews. Furthermore, there was - apart from immediate rejections - no out and out distrust towards our research: not a single interviewee retroactively asked for the interview or shadowing fieldnotes to be removed. If we were considered as friends or allies, *trust* was a lesser issue, while when considered as too critical or 'doing witchcraft', the language and reactions were

understandably more cautious or confrontational. Our reflexive approach helped us realize that in such interactions trust was not built on ideological agreement but on our transparent research processes, including protecting confidentiality.

When conducting data collection in the EP, directly misogynistic comments, or inappropriate behaviour towards us hardly occurred. Contrasting to Sarikakis (2003), we were not singled out or excluded openly as women researchers. Being perceived as young women affected interactions between us and the interviewees that were often older male MEPs. We witnessed and experienced gendered interactions that could be classified as subtle sexism or indirect opposition. Imbalanced power dynamics during interviews led to gendered interactions in which we were sometimes 'pushed' into doing something they recommended for our research, getting a coffee for them, or facing inappropriate behaviour. This affected our rapport with MEPs and what they were willing to share with us.

In turn, being feminists created the risk of being recognised as such by populist and anti-feminist actor, thus jeopardising data collection if suspicion was raised (Bellè 2016). Feminist research and research on gender were still a provocation for some potential participants who offered occasional derogatory reactions; a similar finding to Ahmed (2017) whose assessment of feminism and gender issues elicited provocation. However, feminist issues were not the core of our interview questions and us being women did not necessarily indicate to interviewees that we were feminist. Nonetheless, interviewing anti-feminist actors as feminist researchers sometimes forced us to behave contradictory to our values, for instance applauding at an event we disapproved of, to mimic the affective atmosphere of the room and protect the effort of data collection.

Being white, though, created unearned privileges, such as making our access to and interactions with participants (especially with radical right actors) easier. We were not seen as 'space invaders' nor 'out of place' (Puwar 2004) but rather as belonging to European whiteness (Essed et al. 2019). This experience would have entailed different power and safety dynamics for racialised researchers (cf. Brown 2012). Our positionality within the white norm that dominates the EP (Kantola et al. 2023) granted us the advantage of not being questioned or challenged about our status as European academic researchers.

Our identities of 'researchers', however, meant that we were perceived as 'outsiders' to the extent that we did not share occupational identity with interviewees (Puwar 1997) and thus constantly had to negotiate time boundaries of low priority compared to parliamentary work. As occupational 'outsiders' we were often told basic information about work in the EP and its functioning, which took time away from our research agenda. Finally, with multiple languages spoken by the team, we faced different reactions when interviewing participants in a multilingual setting. Being a native English speaker sometimes even created difficulties in making ourselves understood by non-native English speakers and brought up a hierarchy of power in the form of access to language.

Overall, navigating the intersection of being a feminist researcher, researching gender issues and including oppositional (or hostile) participants, required constant reflection on our positionality and what it meant to conduct professional and fair data collection, even when we were confronted with misogynistic or inappropriate comments. Our experience shows that interviews and participant observation or ethnography have arguably become an accepted research norm for the EP. This suggests the presence of researchers has acquired a degree of normalisation in the political institution, enhancing the possibility to observe the parliamentary process in variant ways. Future research will surely provide additional evidence of our assessment.

Quoted interviews and interview notes

1. ECR MEP, Brussels, 19 Dec 2019
2. Parliamentary Secretariat Staff and Political Group Press Staff, Brussels, 30 Jan 2020
3. Greens/EFA MEP, Brussels, 13 Mar 2020
4. EPP MEP, online, 8 May 2020
5. Greens/EFA MEP, Brussels,19 Mar 2019
6. S&D MEP, Brussels, 30 Jan 2019
7. Renew Group Staff, online, 24 Mar 2020
8. EPP MEP, written response, 28 Oct 2020
9. Parliamentary Secretariat Staff, Brussels, 27 Feb 2020
10. Parliamentary Secretariat Staff, Brussels, 19 Mar 2020
11. Interview and post-interview note with ECR MEP, online, 13 May 2021
12. ID MEP, Brussels, 12 Feb 2020
13. ENF MEP, Brussels, 7 Feb 2019

14. ID Group Staff, Brussels, 28 Feb 2020
15. ECR MEP, online,12 May 2021
16. S&D Group Staff, Brussels, 18 Feb 2020
17. S&D MEP, Brussels, 20 Feb 2020
18. GUE-NGL Secretariat Brussels, 15 May 2019
19. GUE-NGL MEP, online, 23 Oct 2020
20. Greens/EFA MEP, 3 Mar 2020
21. EFDD MEP, Brussels, 29 Jan 2019
22. Greens/EFA Group Staff, Brussels, 14 Nov 2019
23. ECR MEP, Brussels, 31 Jan 2019
24. S&D MEP, online, 27 Nov 2020
25. Parliamentary Secretariat Staff, online, 20 Mar 2020

Quoted ethnographic fieldnotes

1. Informal exchange with female EPP MEP, Brussels, 26 Nov 2018
2. EPP Staff Lunch, Brussels, 23 Jan 2020
3. Meeting Female EP Staff Member, Brussels, 19 Feb 2020
4. Shadowing ENF MEP, Brussels, 7 Feb 2019
5. Carpooling trip to Strasbourg, 9 Feb 2020
6. S&D Staff Goodbye Party, Brussels, 29 Jan 2020
7. EFDD Observational day, Brussels, 29 Jan 2019
8. President Sassoli's Press Conference, Brussels, 2 Mar 2020
9. Meeting with senior staff member, Brussels, 12 Mar 2020
10. Shadowing S&D MEP, Brussels, 18 Oct 2018
11. Shadowing EPP MEP, Brussels, 19 Feb 2019
12. ECR Seminar on Traditional Family, Brussels, 4 Feb 2020

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