

Gender, Violence, and Political Institutions: Struggles over Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament

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The global #MeToo movement exposed the prevalence of sexual harassment across countries, in diverse contexts, and within institutions; including the supposedly gender-friendly European Parliament (EP). Using a unique set of interview data with key actors in the #MeTooEP campaign and Members of European Parliament and staff, this article analyzes the discursive struggles around sexual harassment in the EP. The analysis shows how these discourses fundamentally shaped the patchy institutional response to sexual harassment with findings that illuminate the resistance to institutional change.

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is often presented as the most gender-equal institution of the EU decision-making bodies. Women's representation increased from 36.4 percent to 40.4 percent in the elections of 2019 and the EP is widely regarded as the guarantor of gender-friendly policies. Recent research has begun to differentiate this gender-friendly image with a focus on the less apparent political dynamics and gendered power struggles behind the scenes. Such struggles relate to the substantial differences in the gender politics of the political groups of the EP (Kantola and Rolandsen-Agustin 2016; Luhiste and Kenny 2016). This extant research reveals how unequal gendered practices persist and how women and men Members of European Parliament (MEPs) are differently positioned when carrying out their representative work. At the same time, the EP remains a very white institution, with few black, Asian, and minority ethnic MEPs and staff, for whom working in the EP is a very racialized experience.

This article contributes to these debates by analyzing one specific aspect of the gendered dynamics, practices, and persisting inequalities in the EP, namely

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sexual harassment. The prevalence of sexual harassment in any institution powerfully illustrates how gender shapes the political work and inner life of a political institution. Feminist scholars have long argued that all forms of misogyny, including gendered violence in the form of sexual harassment, is a signal to women of their place in society (Manne 2017). Like any form of gendered violence, it restricts women's representative work by suggesting that their role is not equal to that of men (Krook 2020).

Sexual harassment as a policy issue is not new in the EP, which has a long history of legislating on sexual harassment in workplaces (Zippel 2004, 2006, 2008). Nevertheless, it took the international #MeToo campaign against sexual harassment (2017–) to draw public attention to how widespread sexual harassment was within political institutions. We suggest that the EP became a particularly interesting case for two reasons. First, European media soon began to cover stories about incidents in the parliament and the failure of the official procedures to protect the victims and punish perpetrators. Sexual harassment was clearly prevalent in this supposedly gender-equal institution. Second, and simultaneously, a group of EP workers started the #MeTooEP campaign for visibility and institutional change. Led by parliamentary assistants (Accredited Personal Assistants (APAs) working with MEPs), #MeTooEP acted in close interaction with the formal and informal institutions of the EP.

The research objective of the article is to provide an analysis of the ways in which the key actors in the EP—staff, MEPs, political groups, institutional representatives—constructed sexual harassment in the parliament and how these constructions powerfully shaped the solutions put forward. This makes it possible to understand the potential for and resistance to tackling sexual harassment in the parliament. We contend that feminist institutional analysis combined with discourse analysis provides the most effective conceptual and analytical tools for this endeavor (see Erikson 2019). Theoretically, the article's contribution is to further understandings of the ways in which formal and informal institutions are shaped by discourses, namely by exploring the effects that discourses have on institutional arrangements against sexual harassment in the parliament. In other words, discourses produce effects (Foucault 1980); they can disrupt institutional arrangements seen as normal and “natural”, and enter in struggle with opposing discourses, which in turn act to preserve the integrity of the institutions. Discourses, then, can powerfully maintain and legitimize formal and informal institutions, or can contest and initiate institutional change. These objectives underpin our research questions, which are: first, how is sexual harassment discursively constructed as a problem in the EP by different actors? Second, how do those constructions shape the solutions that are put forward by parliamentary actors? Third, what are the effects of these discourses for institutional change in the parliament?

Our research material consists of first, fifty-one interviews with MEPs and staff conducted in the EP in Brussels between 2018 and 2019, the height of #MeTooEP activities. Second, we draw upon official documents of the EP

(such as parliamentary Rules of Procedure) and plenary debates on sexual harassment to analyze publicly available means of debating the issue. We analyze this combined data with insights from feminist discourse analysis and feminist institutionalism to provide a more nuanced understanding of our research questions.

The findings demonstrate the discursive struggles over sexual harassment in the EP and the resistances and opportunities which emerged for progressive institutional change. Some pro-equality MEPs and staff were willing not only to talk about sexual harassment as an abuse of gendered power in the parliament, but also to enact new rules which carved space for progressive institutional change. In contrast, some MEPs and staff resisted this, framing sexual harassment as a cultural or individual problem, which required first and foremost changing individual attitudes and behavior, rather than reforming institutions. Some conservative MEPs articulated a discourse that constructed the EP as a good institution, deeming the existing institutional practices good enough to tackle sexual harassment. In response, #MeTooEP adopted a combative tone, with a discourse asserting that victims of sexual harassment were harassed workers. The campaign was hugely successful in influencing public debate on sexual harassment in the EU. Our analysis, however, explains why its success in transforming EP institutions was at best partial.

Studying Sexual Harassment in Politics

The European Union has had, since 2002, a Directive on Equal Treatment that enforces equal working conditions between women and men and defines sexual harassment as sex discrimination and a violation of dignity (Zippel 2006, 2008). Because this Directive is legally binding, Member States had to comply and modify their national legal frameworks. Considering that the EU had no competence over “violence against women” as a policy field, many scholars saw this Directive as one of European feminists’ major achievements (Kantola 2010; Zippel 2008).

Zippel provides a detailed analysis of the discursive struggles at the EU level. She argues that the adoption of the Directive was possible only because advocates for an EU-wide intervention against sexual harassment framed it strategically as a *workplace issue* (Zippel 2008). The opponents framed sexual harassment as a *cultural issue* that should be left to Member States. They argued that the vast cultural diversity within the EU hindered common agreement on what constitutes sexual harassment (Zippel 2008, 67). Feminist discourses, in contrast, framed sexual harassment as a *male abuse of power* over women—violence against women—the scope of which would then fall outside EU competences (Zippel 2008, 67). Advocates for an EU-wide intervention, in turn, used the 1976 Equal Treatment Directive, which provided equal treatment for men and women in employment, including working

conditions, as a legal basis to extend the scope of the protection to the prohibition of sexual harassment (Zippel 2008). By framing it as a *workplace issue* and by using EU's authority in economic integration, advocates obtained the amendment of the 1976 Directive into the 2002 Directive, which now includes a provision against sexual harassment at the workplace (Kantola 2010; Zippel 2008).

However, Zippel saw the unsolved problem of cultural diversity as one of the limitations of the Directive. She argued that the freedom of movement for workers across Member States—one EU *acquis*—required a set of standards on what constitutes sexual harassment despite cultural differences. In particular, she asked “whose cultural standards are supposed to be applied when employees from different countries work together . . . ?” (2008, 67). We contend that those concerns remain pertinent today, especially within the EP where EU cultural diversity is quintessential. A further shortcoming was that the Directive's scope was limited to sexual harassment *in* the workplace (Kantola 2010, 114) without considering spaces beyond the workplace, such as online harassment, or particular site of workplaces, such as parliaments.

In 2017, the #MeToo campaign triggered new debates about studying parliaments as particular workplaces (Erikson and Josefsson 2019) where sexual harassment occurs (Collier and Raney 2018a, 2018b; Krook 2018). In the United Kingdom, the reinvigorated debate prompted the resignation of several Cabinet ministers and MPs (Krook 2018, 67). Sexual harassment *in politics* was shown to be facilitated by the parliamentary environment that encouraged, for instance, a “particular employment set-up” making staff vulnerable to harassment from MPs (Krook 2018, 68–69). In Canada, a code of conduct between MPs against sexual harassment from 2015 pre-dated the #MeToo campaign. However, by leaving some of the institutional norms untouched—such as party discipline and an adversarial style of politics—the code merely constituted a new institutional rule “nested” inside old ones, reinforcing and permitting patriarchal norms “under the guise of change” (Collier and Raney 2018b, 796). This shows the limitations of “layering” new institutional practices when structural reforms were needed (Waylen 2014).

These discussions are part of broader debates on violence against women in politics (VAWP), which includes research on violence during elections (Bjarnegård 2018) and in Latin America (Biroli 2018; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016a, 2016b; Piscopo 2016; Restrepo Sanín 2018). In a recent report, the Inter-Parliamentary Union also highlighted the risk for democracy and extended the impact of sexism, harassment, and violence against women in parliaments to parliamentary staff (2018).

Drawing on this extant research, we adopt an approach of discerning the discourses of sexual harassment in the EP and analyzing them in relation to institutional change. Looking at the discourses *inside* the EP allows us to contribute to this previous research on VAWP and sexual harassment, and to better understand the power struggles behind institutional changes.

The EP as a Site of Political Representation and a Workplace

As noted by the research on VAWP, institutional rules and norms shape its prevalence in political institutions. In the case of sexual harassment in parliaments, these include in the first instance parliamentary rules of procedure. The political work of the EP is guided by its Rules of Procedure, which have been frequently modified to ensure effective working of the parliament. In 2006 and 2017, reforms to the Rules of Procedure introduced new penalties for MEPs and staff engaging in inappropriate behavior, including Rule 11 which bans defamatory, racist, and xenophobic language or behavior. However, penalties were controversial and rarely applied (Brack 2017). Moreover, these reforms did not specifically address sexual harassment, and the issue, as well as the procedures related to it, remained undefined.

Remedies for instances of sexual harassment have proven to be problematic for those working as representatives in politics. Over time, legal developments in this area have mostly focused on traditional workplaces, excluding other settings, such as political institutions or virtual spaces (Franks 2012, 655). Indeed, political institutions are not “normal” workplaces, and elected representatives are not working under “normal” conditions. One example of this is parliamentary immunity and privilege (Corbett, Jacobs, and Neville 2016, 76). The EP is home to MEPs from many different Member States, each of which have their own legal systems that enforce different levels of immunity. Thus, as MEPs they share political space in one parliament, while having very different experiences, perceptions, and expectations of parliamentary immunity.

Like all parliaments, the EP employs a wide range of staff for its administration, maintenance, and catering. Staff hired by the parliament, or by political groups, have different employment conditions than parliamentary assistants hired by MEPs. Although employed in the parliament, all are differently positioned in terms of their tasks, roles, and contracts. *Vis-à-vis* sexual harassment, these differentiated terms of employment result in quite different vulnerabilities: MEPs rely on APAs on the basis of a mutual trust; if that trust is broken, APAs’ employment can be terminated before their contracts end (Pegan 2017). Most MEPs have two or three APAs working in their personal offices, often in close contact, and many will travel with them between the parliamentary locations of Brussels and Strasbourg.

We suggest that this circumstantial diversity raises particular questions in relation to understanding sexual harassment in the EP. While the proximity of APAs to their MEPs may increase the risk of sexual harassment, any attempt to resist or report misbehavior may lead to the APA losing their MEP’s trust. Some issues are common to all parliaments: established institutional culture, norms, and practices that maintain strong power hierarchies between staff and MEPs, as well as a culture of silence, deemed necessary to protect the institution’s credibility. Issues specific to the EP, include the fact that MEPs

and staff come from different political cultures and that twenty-four languages are officially used. During the 8th legislature (2014–2019), they sat in eight political groups ranging from the traditional well-established groups of EPP, S&D, and ALDE to the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL, and finally to the more volatile and more recent (radical) right populist groups of ECR, EFDD, and ENF. There were also non-attached MEPs (NIs). Despite this diversity they come together to create a “bubble” (Busby 2013), where the above-mentioned mixture of national political norms and practices meet a well-established political and institutional culture. Despite this diversity, the EP hosts very few black and minority ethnic MEPs or staff. Rather, there have been outspoken nazi (Greek Golden Dawn), and several Eurosceptic parties and MEPs, seeking to undermine the EU from within.

Interestingly, the EP had institutional mechanisms for tackling sexual harassment from within but these were largely dormant. Since 2014, the Anti-Harassment Committee of the EP, despite having jurisdiction over both psychological and sexual harassment, and being responsible for complaints against MEPs, had not investigated a single case of sexual harassment prior to 2019. Both MEPs and staff were represented on the Committee and a gender balance is respected; there was, however, no indication that members were trained to review sensitive cases. The Committee reported to the EP President, who took the final decision (Bureau decision 2018: article 11).

In this context, the international #MeToo campaign gave a real boost to debating sexual harassment in the EP. As in other parliaments, incidents of sexual harassment did not suddenly appear in the EP with the #MeToo campaign in 2017 (Krook 2018). Instead, attempts to tackle them preceded the campaign. Staff members had already used internal mechanisms to complain against abuse but the “culture of silence” left them with no remedies (see *Politico* 2017). The campaign was important in exposing the extent of the problem within the parliament, the shortcomings of existing mechanisms, the political contestations, and it encouraged staff to mobilize.

It made its way in the EP, first, by surfacing in October 2017 during a plenary debate about the adoption of a resolution combating sexual harassment and abuse in the EU (hereinafter “the Resolution”) where MEPs shared their own experiences. Second, it involved the parliament when MEP Édouard Martin told a French radio that his parliamentary assistant had kept in a notebook testimonies of sexual harassment since 2014 (see *Euractiv* 2017). The notebook then became highly visible in French and European media and the public attention encouraged the parliamentary assistant to co-found #MeTooEP. The staff-led #MeTooEP campaign started in March 2018 and consisted of mainly APAs, trainees, political advisors, and other staff members across the political spectrum. Their first action was to collect 1,000 signatures on a petition directing attention toward the issue internally. It requested three changes: (i) changing the composition of the Anti-Harassment Committee, (ii) an external audit of independent experts to review the Anti-Harassment

Committee's work, and (iii) mandatory training for MEPs and group leaders on sexual harassment.

By launching a blog—a digital version of the notebook—#MeTooEP received a lot of publicity in European and national media. Similarly, they successfully highlighted sexual harassment as a relevant political issue during the 2019 election. By asking candidates to sign a pledge to “show their commitment” to efforts outlawing sexual abuse, they made candidates symbolically committed and accountable—notably both the EP President and the Anti-Harassment Committee President signed it.

Toward a Discursive Approach to Studying Gender Violence in Politics

To investigate the political struggles around sexual harassment in the EP and how they shaped the gendered institutions of the parliament this article draws theoretically and methodologically on feminist institutional (FI) analysis and combines it with discourse analysis. The article develops a framework with which to analyze how different actors constructed sexual harassment in relation to the EP, and how their constructions shaped parliamentary institutions in gendered ways. In so doing, we theoretically contribute to FI analysis by pinpointing the role of discursive struggles (about what sexual harassment may be) that powerfully shape how the problems would best be tackled in political institutions (see also [Erikson 2019](#)).

The contributions made by FI scholarship have provided significant analytical insights to explain the gendered foundations of political institutions, the gendered mechanisms of continuity and change, and the impact of gendered actors ([Kenny 2007](#); [Krook and Mackay 2011–2015](#); [Waylen 2017](#)). One of the key insights we draw upon is the distinction between formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions can be defined as codified rules. Informal institutions, in turn, signify customary elements, traditions, moral values, religious beliefs, and norms of behavior ([Chappell and Waylen 2013](#), 604). Thereby informal institutions too can be recognized by the fact that not following them may involve sanctions—and conversely conforming to them offers rewards ([Erikson 2019](#), 26). The interplay between formal rule changes—such as the adoption of gender quotas—and “hidden” informal institutions is complex and the latter may interact with formal rules to block, reverse, or support progressive gender reform ([Mackay 2014](#); [Waylen 2014, 2017](#)).

Understanding the dynamics behind progressive change toward more gender-equal institutions or blocking and slowing it down is at the core of FI concerns. Institutional change can be studied with the help of four concepts: (i) *displacement* where new institutions are created to replace old rules in a process of norm competition; (ii) *layering* where new rules are introduced on top

of existing ones; (iii) *drift* where the impact of existing rules change because of changes in the environment and institutions come to have a new meaning, and (iv) *conversion*, where actors work with the system and utilize any ambiguity within existing rules to make institutions behave differently (Kantola and Lombardo 2017, 101–2; Waylen 2014, 219–20).

Ideas and discourses occupy a central place in the process of institutional change and there are a variety of approaches to studying the relationship between ideas, discourses, and institutions (see Erikson 2019, 26–27). We study institutions from a Foucauldian perspective which begins with understanding power as omnipresent in all social relations; its exercise thus ensures that every aspect of the social world is political (Foucault 1972, 1980), and all institutions are embedded in discursive contexts. Discourses, then, always matter in relation to institutions. This calls for an understanding of institutions not as something fixed and given, but rather as fluid phenomena that are in constant need of reproduction (Bacchi and Rönnblom 2014). This article thus employs a synthesis of Foucauldian discourse analysis with more recent FI analysis (see also Kantola 2019) that critically scrutinizes which institutional solutions certain discourses about sexual harassment entailed.

In terms of method of analysis, we discern, first, key discourses and ask who articulates them. Questions of power and resistance are relevant to the method as are struggles and contradictions (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). The analysis shows the differences within the EP, its political groups and MEPs, and challenges the impression of the institution as a unified, gender-friendly actor. Second, we analyze the institutional solutions that discourses entail. This is one of our key contributions. Analyzing discourses and institutions helps to illuminate the difficulties of institutional change as institutions are always embedded in broader discursive contexts. This can be seen in the solutions put forward and whether they are actually enacted upon—an issue posed by our third research question. The research interest, then, is not to study the strategic framing of the issue and the way that different discourses are used strategically.

Our research material was gathered in the EP in Brussels in 2018–2019 and consists of fifty-one interviews with women and men MEPs and members of staff. It is drawn from a larger study focusing on gendered practices and policies of the EP's political groups. First, we analyze the general interviews which explore MEP and staff experiences and perceptions of the gendered practices, including explicit questions about sexual harassment. The interviewees came from all EP's political groups and represented a full gender balance. We have selected to analyze only those parts that deal explicitly with sexual harassment. Second, we have analyzed four interviews with key MEPs and staff focusing solely on the issue of sexual harassment in the EP. Third, we analyzed the publicly available documents about sexual harassment in the EP, including parliament's plenary debates on Resolution 2017/2897; Rules of procedures revision 2018/2170 (Corbett); EP measures during 2018 on ending sexual harassment

and violence against women in public spaces; the 2018 Ombudsman's report on sexual harassment; and the press release entitled "MEPs propose measures to combat mobbing and sexual harassment." Finally, we also used #MeTooEP blog, press conferences, and events that were recorded.

Constructing Sexual Harassment as an Issue in the EP

This section focuses on discourses about sexual harassment in the EP and how they imply particular institutional solutions. We group discourses in four: (i) *abuse of gendered power*, (ii) *private or cultural issue*, (iii) *good institution*, and (iv) *harassed workers*. Entailed in them are four different institutional solutions which we discuss in relation to each. Framing sexual harassment as an *abuse of gendered power* calls for creating new rules and practices. Constructing it as a *private or cultural issue* prioritizes changing attitudes instead of institutions. The *good institution* discourse prefers using existing institutions to tackle sexual harassment. Finally, the *harassed workers* discourse suggests transforming both formal and informal institutions. We apply feminist institutionalism to explain what is at stake in each (Lowndes 2019; Waylen 2014).

Table 1 presents an overview of the findings on discourses; proposed solutions; institutional changes entailed; and who represents them. Whilst the discourses are articulated by different actors, distinctions between them are analytical: individual actors may articulate different and multiple discourses.

Table 1. Discourses and solutions on tackling sexual harassment in the European Parliament

Discourse about sexual harassment	Proposed solutions	Institutional change	Represented by
<i>Abuse of gendered power</i>	New rules	Institutional layering	Pro-gender-equality MEPs in the EP
<i>Private or cultural problem</i>	Attitude change	Changing individuals instead of institutions	MEPs across the political spectrum
<i>Good institution</i>	Using existing internal mechanisms	Preserving institutions	MEPs in key positions of power, especially from the EPP
<i>Harassed workers</i>	Transforming both formal and informal institutions	Institutional displacement	#MeTooEP

Some are clearly more compatible (*abuse of gendered power* and *harassed workers* discourses, or *private or cultural issue* and *good institution* discourses), whilst others would be incompatible (*abuse of gendered power* and *private or cultural issue*). These findings are discussed one by one in the empirical analysis sections below.

Abuse of Gendered Power

A defining feature of feminist scholarship and activism in the field of violence against women in society and politics is to articulate such manifestations as abuses of gendered power (e.g. Zippel 2008, 67). In relation to sexual harassment, discourse of *abuse of gendered power* explains why sexual harassment takes place in politics and society. In the EP plenary debate on the Resolution, there were various manifestations of this discourse.

All MEPs from the biggest and most traditional political groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE) and the pro-equality groups (Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL) who spoke in the debate constructed the issue in a similar way, highlighting the gendered power imbalance that sexual harassment is based on. For instance, Malin Björk (GUE/NGL) emphasized that sexual harassment was not a cultural or regional problem, but a structural one. MEPs on the political left, such as Wajid Khan (S&D), often emphasized that “sexual harassment knows no class or culture and is not confined to the home or the workplace”. Both Björk (GUE/NGL) and Terry Reintke (Greens/EFA) also invited men to participate in combating sexual harassment. A number of MEPs sitting in the plenary revealed their own experiences and displayed signs with “#MeToo” inscriptions in their respective languages, such as #moiaussi and #yotambien.

Many MEPs who spoke in the debate were arguably the “usual suspects” in the EP. They had long track records of working for gender equality, many of whom sat in the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM). Notably, the plenary debate was an occasion to endorse a political role by defining sexual harassment as a form of gendered abuse of power rooted in society as a whole, instead of challenging the institutions of the EP—which may not directly speak to the concerns of the electorate. It was noted that among the forty speakers during the debate, only five were men. In contrast, some MEPs (Skripek ECR, Troszczynski ENF) seized the opportunity to voice their opposition to or lack of interest in the issue, indicating that despite the general outrage and empathy with the victims, the issue was not a primary concern for all. It also illustrated the limits to what can be achieved by MEPs debating the issue in a plenary session.

In sharp contrast to the plenary debate, our interview material shows that perception of sexual harassment among MEPs is far more complex. Power of certain discourses evoked resistance. For instance, some MEPs resisted change, often by expressing it through anger and exaggeration. One male MEP from

right populist EFDD suggested that #MeToo had made his work impossible, that it was a “nonsense” with which he “disagreed profoundly”:

It’s one of the reasons why I’m very reluctant to hire people . . . if you can’t keep your hands off the office staff then obviously you’ve got a problem. But I mean, I don’t know what you do to cure that apart from having people turn into eunuchs. (EFDD MEP 7:40)

Another MEP suggested the debate had gone too far and claimed that “people are almost now frightened to say hello to a member of the opposite sex or be sat in a room alone with them” (EFDD MEP 6:61). In our fieldnotes supplementing the interviews, we noted how one MEP claimed nowadays one “cannot touch a sleeve without it being sexual harassment” (ENF Shadowing notes). In sum, while EP plenary speeches seem to point to a visible consensus among some MEPs, our interview material shows various forms of resistance to the seriousness of sexual harassment in the EP. This became even more apparent in what followed.

MEPs who articulated discourse about sexual harassment as a gendered abuse of power in the plenary often expressed openness toward creating new rules and practices. For instance, in the Resolution’s plenary debate, Reintke (Greens/EFA) called for an EU directive on violence against women, and for specific measures in parliament to tackle sexual harassment. Bearder (ALDE) called for MEPs’ mandatory training and more robust guarantees that those reporting sexual harassment will not lose their jobs. This openness to formal institutional change also explains #MeTooEP campaign’s partial success and why some practices were changed.

Sexual Harassment as a Private or Cultural Problem

Our interview data illustrate two ways to construct sexual harassment, both of which directly opposed the idea that it was a manifestation of an abuse of gendered power: sexual harassment, first, as a private problem, and second, as a cultural problem. The two are distinct from one another but a key element in both is countering the idea that sexual harassment would be a matter of structural gender inequalities. The significance of discourse when debating European sexual harassment policies has long roots, as shown by [Zippel \(2008\)](#) and discussed above.

An MEP from ALDE suggested that sexual harassment “has to be managed in privacy It’s good for the people who has been harassed, and also I think it’s good for that who has done it.” She also said she did not “always understand that people first go to public” (ALDE MEP 1:67). Another, from ECR, described how she has provided help to members of staff on an individual basis “trying to stop certain behaviors happening” (ECR MEP 2:15). Both

citations point to a desire to solve the issue at individual rather than institutional level.

Some MEPs we interviewed revealed personal experiences of being sexually harassed while working as MEPs, but outside the parliamentary context. One reflected on how she stayed silent, despite her relatively powerful position, and expressed her understanding of difficulties faced by staff members in speaking out (S&D MEP 12:17). Another MEP told us about his awareness of a case of sexual harassment between two gay men, and how both still worked at the EP because the harassed “isn’t willing to report” (EFDD MEP 48:24). These examples seem to confirm the strong legacy of treating such incidents of violence as a private issue.

Even more common among MEPs was to frame sexual harassment in terms of cultural differences arising from the diversity in the parliament. In the same way, this discourse steered responsibility away from the EP, toward “other cultures” as opposed to “ours.” For instance, MEP Wiśniewska (ECR) said during a plenary debate about gender mainstreaming in the EP: “cultural, educated people do not do such things,” whilst another told us that: “There are big cultural differences across the EP, what is acceptable in certain member states to be said and done is not acceptable in others” (ECR MEP 2:11). Similarly, a member of staff said: “and I don’t blame, any kind of nationality for it but there is a certain moment that cultures are so different” (ALDE Staff 18:43). Both citations indicate how the EP’s cultural diversity is often uncritically used as a justification for its slow and weak response to sexual harassment. The effect of both discourses is that responsibility for sexual harassment is attributed to individuals, “other” cultures, and random circumstances, rather than the EP’s institutional structures.

Constructing sexual harassment as a private or cultural issue resulted in an emphasis on individualized actions and strategies, which decades of feminist scholarship has shown to be a typically right-wing discourse around the lack of gender equality. It foregrounds changing individual attitudes and behavior whilst ignoring structural change (see [Kantola and Saari 2014](#)). Our analysis illustrates how sexual harassment in the EP is still constructed this way, and favored across the political spectrum: a private issue resolved through individual agency. Surprisingly, this is not just the preference of right political groups, but also male and female liberal and conservative MEPs, which explains the difficulties in realizing meaningful structural changes.

There are rich seams of evidence, both in plenary debates and in our interview data, that exemplify this. For instance, during the plenary debate about the Resolution, Julie Girling from ECR argued:

if there’s fear of losing a job we can actually individually as MEPs do something . . . if there is an assistant out there who feels they are going

to lose their job, come and work in my office then temporarily, I will offer you a safe haven.

Another MEP from ECR also put forward such individual solutions. She suggested in an interview that:

There are certain strategies that you need to employ and certain . . . behaviors that you need to know as a young woman . . . in one case I had to speak to the member concerned and the poor person had no idea that his behavior was making other female colleagues and staff feel the way that they did. (ECR MEP 2:17)

In this lengthy citation, sensitivity to other cultures required these individual tailored solutions. Similarly, an MEP told us that as a young professional she had had to adopt individual strategies to tackle the possibility of sexual harassment. This meant that she would accept “a coffee but, not a dinner” (ECR Shadowing notes).

Changing men’s behavior was also a central solution. In the plenary debate about the Resolution, men—as a category—were called upon to get involved, to condemn sexual harassment. For instance, Linnéa Engström (Greens/EFA) argued in favor of more men acting as “role models in this fight.” Similarly, our interview data show that older men, in particular, were often constructed as in need of “training”:

. . . men need training too. Particularly older men. Sometimes, they will make remarks that are actually quite innocent to them but are very offensive for women. (ECR MEP 3:34)

In other words, constructing sexual harassment as a “generational issue” (ALDE Staff 18:40) and seeking to change older men’s behavior is perceived as key in this discourse.

In the comments above, sexual harassment is framed as both an individualized and an eminently solvable issue. In this discourse, it can be tackled through individual strategies of “offering safe havens,” having the right approach “as a young woman,” or if more powerful MEPs, including men, speak and act on behalf of women. It does not, however, permeate the institutional culture of the parliament as a whole, or demand legislative, cultural, structural changes. The effect of these solutions is that they create, or reinforce, a top-down power relationship between MEPs and APAs, where MEPs endorse a maternalistic/paternalistic role by confronting the “bully” and educating “young woman,” leaving APAs in a position of dependency.

Vivien Lowndes provides a more positive reading. She suggests that:

the communication of persuasive discourses about the impact of sexual harassment on women in public life via the ‘MeToo’ movement may

turn out to be more effective at dislodging embedded patterns of behavior than changing laws and policies; or such discursive mechanisms may serve over time to deepen the impact of these policies and help ensure compliance. (2019, 9)

In other words, changing the ways in which sexual harassment is talked about may in some cases be more transformative than institutional change.

The Good Institution

Some MEPs articulated a *good institution* discourse when discussing sexual harassment in the EP. We argue that this discourse is specific to debate in the EP and had not been articulated in previous debates on sexual harassment policy in the EU more broadly (Zippel 2008). This vision was mainly supported by officials in the EP, such as the EP President and the Anti-Harassment Committee President, namely people in positions of power who most identified with the institution.

For instance, during a public interview, when asked whether the parliament had a problem with sexual harassment, former EP President Antonio Tajani (EPP) answered “No . . . no There is a team working on this Nobody say to the team ‘I have a problem with sexual harassment’ There is a lot of propaganda against sexual harassment.” In this citation, the word ‘propaganda’ was a reference to #MeTooEP. Similarly, an MEP from EPP said to us: “the institution could be undermined when it actually does much better than others . . . when we work for the institution we must make it better, but not damage its credibility’ (EPP MEP 51). This discourse stressed the imperative of protecting the EP’s reputation.

Our findings also show how this determination to protect the institution reverberated as a backlash on #MeTooEP. One reform suggested by #MeTooEP was characterized as foolish by a parliamentary assistant:

One should not forget that . . . the Committee is advisory and the final decision is devolved to the EP President . . . if we have a Committee with a majority of parliamentary assistants and legal and medical experts . . . there is no guarantee that the EP President will follow the Committee’s recommendation anymore. (GUE/NGL APA 32)

In the above view, the existing mechanisms—i.e. MEP’s dominant position in the Anti-Harassment Committee—ensured reliability. It also suggested that without safeguards, political vengeance could pass through.

Constructing the EP as a good institution was a way to criticize #MeTooEP with robust language, because the campaign had questioned its image. In the following quote, MEP Élisabeth Morin-Chartier (EPP), President of the Anti-Harassment Committee (from 2014 to 2019), says:

Here and there you'll hear about this and that happen I know some may fantasize on a blog . . . where everyone would spill out what they have to say You know, when we talk harassment, systematically people assume sexual harassment Naturally it is juicy . . . it makes the headlines. (joint press point, October 3, 2018, author's translation)

There was a visible tension between the Anti-Harassment Committee and #MeTooEP. While both claimed authority over the issue, a partnership was difficult: "There is no collaboration between the #MeToo and the Committee . . . only contacts . . . the Committee is official, statutory, whereas the blog is more like a spontaneous thing" (EPP MEP 51). This illusion established a hierarchy between a "spontaneous" unofficial campaign and the official institutional response through the Committee.

The *good institution* discourse places emphasis on using the EP's existing internal mechanisms to tackle sexual harassment by stressing the role of the Anti-Harassment Committee. Constructing the institution as *good*, this discourse does not entail change. The strategy is quite the opposite: to preserve and defend it. Hence none of Waylen's (2014) four dimensions of gender change—displacement, layering, drift, or conversion—are applicable. Instead, the discourse can be read as urging institutional stability and pushing back against advocates of reform as a form of resistance toward institutional change.

The solutions that arise from the *good institution* discourse utilize existing mechanisms in the EP and suggest improving them through legal mechanisms. For instance, one of our interviewees claimed that everyone has the right to challenge the Anti-Harassment Committee in Court:

If the way harassment . . . moral harassment . . . is dealt with in the Committee has evolved . . . it is because some persons who deemed that the Committee's functioning and procedure were not correct, complained before the Court. (GUE/NGL APA 32)

This solution was discursively constructed as both an ethical response and a justifiable opposition to the remedies advanced by #MeTooEP:

There exist legal battles . . . that, I believe, the MeToo movement cannot ignore . . . promoting a stance that discourages from taking action . . . saying that the official proceedings are not appropriate . . . for me, this is wrong. (GUE/NGL APA 32)

This solution sought to preserve the status quo and ignored the existence of additional gendered barriers when taking a sexual harassment case to court.

The reference only to moral harassment in the above citation reflected the Anti-Harassment Committee's inexperience; it had not dealt with any case of sexual harassment before 2019. This type of remedy, one that depends on existing institutions and that values stability over progressive change, is mirrored in other contexts too. In the Nordic countries, discourses about the women-friendly welfare state, and myths about achievement of gender equality, have acted against the recognition of remaining inequalities and finding efficient solutions to them (Kantola 2006; Martinsson, Griffin, and Nygren 2017).

Harassed Workers

Unlike the above discourses, #MeTooEP articulated a *harassed workers discourse*. We use this term to underscore how it foregrounded the category of workers over power relations and hierarchies between different staff categories and MEPs. Through this discourse, #MeTooEP managed to frame and politicize the issue in novel ways, distinct from the *abuse of gendered power* discourse discussed above. Whilst those articulating the latter were MEPs in institutionalized power positions in the parliament, the *harassed workers* discourse had an activist emphasis and was directly targeting the EP (Berthet 2019). A further difference between these two discourses, which we discuss below, was that the solutions put forward by the *harassed workers* discourse were concrete and practical, based on EP's workers perspective.

In their blog, #MeTooEP answered "Who we are" with the opening sentence: "We are workers of the European Parliament." Similarly, a female staff member explained in an interview to us: "we want a safe space for workers . . . we want to change the structure . . . this blog is the voice of the voiceless" (S&D APA 45). The position was echoed by a man staff member who explained: "We want to create a safe space for all workers and we are here to represent all workers" (#MeTooEP press conference, October 19, 2018).

The language of protecting and representing the workers departed from that which constructed women as victims of sexual harassment. The subject position of "worker" was more empowering than "victim," and also less gendered. It provided a clear focus for the campaign: it was about EP's workers and not exclusively about political representatives. However, it may also be that not all victims of sexual harassment in the parliament identified with the category of "workers"; arguably, it may have been alienating to some—those who held views, for instance, more aligned with the political right, or a presumably different class position, for instance in senior positions of expertise. Like all discourses, this one too, despite its empowering attempts, may be exclusionary.

The particular moniker of *harassed workers* also underlines its combative tone. A campaign representative stated "we are here to fight" (#MeTooEP press conference, October 19, 2018). #MeTooEP was unapologetic, uncompromising, and ready to provide a harsh critique—for example: "The Committee makes the Parliament look prettier . . . but it does not work"

(S&D APA 45). On the one hand, #MeTooEP was struggling against the EP's positive image as champion of democracy (*good institutions* discourse) and gender equality (*abuse of gendered power* discourse) whereby, in appearance, the EP already monitored the issue. On the other hand, they faced potential denials of the issue's seriousness (*private and cultural* discourse) and the slothful pace of positive change within the institution.

The combative language was combined with feminist and democratic ideals such as “safe spaces” and “public interest,” illustrated by the following:

Some people have thought of the blog as a threat, whereas it is a tool in our common, public interest. Some have reacted by saying it is dangerous, but the blog merely does what the Parliament should do. (S&D APA 45)

This statement highlights internal conflicts on how to prevent and end sexual harassment. Whilst some defended the blog as a shelter, others saw it as a dangerous threat.

For instance, some actors in the EP tried to contain #MeTooEP. A #MeTooEP spokesperson described how they “lose so much energy in terms of backlash” when, for instance, invited to talk at an event; one EP Vice-President from the EPP called the organizers “to cancel my intervention because I was sending a bad image of the European Parliament” (conference panel, European Parliament, January 30, 2019). This citation powerfully shows how discourse about protecting the reputation of the institution, and the associated construction of anyone who challenges that as a “trouble maker,” often came from the EPP.

Interestingly—and unexpectedly—some MEPs from green and left political groups were also critical of #MeTooEP for being “hijacked by men and turned into nothing more than a hypocritical hashtag is worse than nothing” (GreensEFA MEP 10:24). Similarly, an S&D staff member believed that #MeTooEP “is not in line with the group . . . [In] the group we want to support whistleblowing, but I think the first approach should be to solve it in, inside” (S&D Staff 46:40). Both citations illustrate the political struggles and contradictions which surrounded #MeTooEP and its work on combating sexual harassment in the EP. They also highlight different approaches within political groups.

The *harassed workers* discourse constructs sexual harassment as such a deep, fundamental, and far-reaching problem that solutions need to be transformative and changes fundamental. In contradistinction to the language of *good institution* discourse, here the remedies go beyond institutional layering. Unlike the *abuse of gendered power* discourse, #MeTooEP solutions are based on an assessment of workers' daily struggles and seek concrete immediate changes in both the working conditions and the parliamentary culture. They seek meaningful reforms of both formal institutions (changes in rules and procedures)

and informal institutions (norms and culture). In terms of institutional change, they constitute attempts at displacement (Waylen 2014, 219), for creating new institutions to replace the old rules; including informal gendered norms. For instance, this #MeTooEP spokesperson suggested “to [write] rules” that go beyond political “declarations condemning a certain kind of behavior” (conference panel, European Parliament, January 30, 2019).

Reassessing MEPs’ responsibilities and workers’ conditions of employment was also a recommendation of #MeTooEP:

What we said from the beginning is that immunity cannot mean impunity . . . so we need to reconsider what is the sense of immunity . . . and also freedom of mandate . . . we need to work on the precariousness of certain work contracts . . . [workers] need to have guarantees otherwise it’s a double penalty . . . you’re a victim and you also may lose your job. (conference panel, European Parliament, January 30, 2019)

This solution suggested deeper forms of redress by targeting parliamentary structures (i.e. representative privilege and conditions of employment) as a further means to combat sexual harassment. Earlier, we alluded to the fact that parliamentary immunity could offer institutional protection to sexual harassers. #MeTooEP sought to redefine these two institutional rules, parliamentary immunities and freedom of mandate, in favor of transformative change.

However, the interview material reflects different views about transforming parliamentary privileges. For example, some resisted the idea of obligatory training for MEPs because they “are directly elected from the citizens, so you cannot really put too many obligations” on them (S&D Staff 46:40). Another interviewee, also aligned with the political left, said to us that public discussions about ways in which the Committee is dysfunctional may be harmful as it may discourage some victims from coming forward and isolate them (GUE/NGL APA 32). This illustrates how far-reaching critiques, and their associated changes, can also be problematic: they are either unrealistic, or they actually make others more vulnerable. It also highlights differences within political groups.

The battles over remedies to sexual harassment were highly visible in the EP. They were marked by different notions of institutional change, and often accompanied by obvious ideological directions. MEPs on the political right were more likely to speak about individual solutions, stressing the agency of both victims and perpetrators. These discourses constructed gender in strictly binary terms: “young women” who needed to develop coping strategies, and “older men” who required training in how to behave. Institutional change was ruled out by definitional fiat in these discourses. In contrast, MEPs on the political left emphasized structural issues, isolating the problem less as the sum of individual actions, and more a question of a culture permeated by gendered institutional norms. Interestingly, MEPs from established pro-EU

groups on the political right were more comfortable with existing institutional procedures and those who defended them, whilst Eurosceptics and right populists, were more likely to seize upon opportunities to question the EP's legitimacy, albeit not in the name of gender equality. #MeTooEP politicized several issues, including the ways in which the EP's institutional regime (Anti-Harassment Committee, parliamentary working conditions, immunities, staff employment contracts) enabled sexual harassment. One of the most visible parts of the debate has been whether to require MEPs and staff to take part in compulsory training about sexual harassment. Our analysis explains why even this was, and remains, not an easy solution.

Effects of the Discourses for Institutional Change in the Parliament

Finally, we provide answers to our third research question about the effects of discourses on institutional change in the Parliament. First, institutional changes did occur in 2017 and 2019, respectively. They included voluntary pilot training for MEPs, which started after the Resolution's vote, and a new institutionalized code of good conduct which included an explicit reference to sexual harassment (paragraph 5). Using soft language, it specified that MEPs "may not be elected" to certain positions if they did not abide by it, and "should take part in specialized training" (paragraphs 5 and 7). Each MEP's declaration appeared on the EP website, along with their declaration of financial interests, in the 9th legislature (2019–2024).

Second, several staff members of political groups and MEPs confirmed the creation of some new rules in political groups. Examples included: training for all at the political group level (GreensEFA Staff 41:6); training of selected staff members who will then train managers, heads of unit, deputies, and secretary generals (ECR Staff 19:12); the appointment of confidential counsellors (ALDE Staff 18:40); and finally, new anti-harassment guidelines for some political groups (GUE/NGL Staff 26:18). For instance, when asked about whether the ECR group had an Ombudsperson, like the GreensEFA, a member of staff told us:

No. No we don't . . . we have recently had two of our people have completed . . . courses . . . We have been told, that this is the way to go . . . it's born out of the sexual harassment issue. (ECR Staff 19:12)

Similarly, a staff member from ALDE told us:

We have . . . new rules in place after the #MeToo affair . . . collective effort with all the groups, at, our level . . . we have counsellors, (confidential counsellor), inside the group and external counsellors (so) people can go. (ALDE Staff 18:40)

Thus, some new rules and practices were evident at the political group level, yet they varied greatly between groups.

Whilst constituting clear signs of progress and impact of the #MeTooEP campaign, these new rules may have institutional weaknesses. We read them as examples of *layering* in institutional change, where new rules are introduced on top of old ones and not in competition with them (Waylen 2014, 219). This is a common strategy in trying to achieve change toward more gender-equal practices, but with well-known shortcomings that were recognized by some of our interviewees. For instance, this #MeTooEP spokesperson described the new measures' weaknesses, which even if thoroughly enforced, may not lead to the transformative change they sought:

The code of conduct? The one you get when you for example enter a position, you sign it and you give it back they sign it and give it back, they don't care about it. It's just a formality. (ALDE APA 31:43)

Mandatory training was also greeted with some scepticism by MEPs on both the political right and left. As a structural issue, sexual harassment will not stop just by saying that it is wrong, suggested one MEP in our interviews:

I believe that people, some people do things because they can. Not because they don't know that it is not okay . . . so I don't believe that mandatory training would change the situation. (EPP MEP 8:18)

Another MEP from S&D also explained how counterproductive training could be:

The training they gave us was all about rape and sexual violence and literally didn't mention at all, sexual harassment in the workplace. So all the middle-aged white men who actually need some training . . . went away thinking that because they weren't actually rapists, it's all fine. (S&D MEP 13:40)

These interviewees suggested that such training fulfils the role of "ticking the box" for good practice but has not yet proved to be meaningful.

Feminist institutionalism helps to explain how MEPs and staff are embedded in settings where their actions are shaped and constrained by "institutional rules that distribute power along gendered lines" (Lowndes 2019, 5). Because of this, implementing new gender-equality measures, such as mandatory training, were inefficient and frustrated gender-equality actors in the EP. Furthermore, measures such as training and signatory codes of conduct do not change structural imbalances, which enable sexual harassment in parliamentary contexts. In the EP, they included precarious work contracts for MEPs' personal assistants (hired based on "trust"), and the MEPs'

freedom of mandate, and meant that institutional changes, such as they were, remained soft and powerless.

Conclusion

This article analyzed four competing discourses that coalesced around debates on sexual harassment in the EP. Sexual harassment was constructed either as a *gendered abuse of power* deeply rooted in society; as a *private or a cultural issue*; as something only solvable through the EP as a *good institution*; or as an *harassed workers* discourse focusing on the power hierarchies at stake in the EP. The first two discourses have long roots in European sexual harassment policy debates (Zippel 2008). The latter two were more novel and specific to debating sexual harassment in a parliamentary context.

Each discourse conditioned debates differently: some heightened the prospect of significant institutional change, while others considerably limited the possibility. A systematic discussion of interplay between discourses and proposed institutional change was a key contribution of the article. Both the focus on sexual harassment as a gendered abuse of power and the harassed workers discourse called for new institutions with new rules and practices. In contrast, the constructions of sexual harassment as a private or cultural issue did not question the EP's gendered structures identified by the former. In this discourse, institutional reform was indirectly resisted because sexual harassment was seen as inevitable in a culturally diverse workplace, where behavior change was an individual responsibility. Similarly, the good institution discourse promoted the notion that sexual harassment was either somewhat overblown by those wishing to undermine the institution's integrity, or that the consequence of individual agency were not structural features of the institution.

Some MEPs on the radical right were happy to critique the parliament but this had more to do with their Euroscepticism than support for those campaigning against sexual harassment. Other MEPs, from the more established political groups, such as the EPP, were more concerned to protect the establishment, both against Eurosceptics and #MeTooEP. They had a powerful position in the EP and were willing to cut short the growing number of initiatives by quickly voting for, and implementing, immediate solutions, however fragile. Contradictions were equally apparent on the political left. While most of #MeTooEP's activists belonged to groups on the left and center (GUE/NGL, GreensEFA, S&D, and ALDE), our data show that some interviewees from these political groups profoundly disagreed with the campaign's methods and objectives. For instance, they objected to the public nature of the #MeTooEP blog, regarding it as unethical and making people even more vulnerable through exclusionary tendencies.

While #MeTooEP aimed for transformative changes at multiple levels, such as re-evaluating parliamentary privileges and immunities, reassessing

worker's employment conditions and protection, reforming the Anti-Harassment Committee's composition and training MEPs and staff on sexual harassment, the real outcomes were far less ambitious. With the weak addition of a code of conduct, and few patchy, unharmonized, measures at the political group level, responsibility to tackle sexual harassment remains on individuals (mostly young women workers) and their strategies. The evidence strongly suggests that even in a presumably gender-equal institution such as the EP, it is profoundly difficult to manifest substantive change. Sexual harassment remains a deeply polarizing, political, and gendered issue.

Notes

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