

From gender equality champion to anti-gender battleground? The European Parliament and the contestation of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity

Abstract

The European Parliament's (EP) image as supranational gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity promoter is challenged by the increase of anti-gender claims and positions. We discuss what specific vulnerabilities and threats the EP's strong position in these matters currently experiences given the growing number of conservative, radical right and populist parties in the EP. To that end, we rely on the emerging international norm of a gender sensitive parliament. We first extend this norm to comprise both gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity to meet standards of equality and inclusivity, but especially to acknowledge the fact that anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as progressive gender issues. Subsequently, we analyze where along the four dimensions of a gender and – in our case – LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament the EP could be vulnerable to anti-gender strategies exploiting institutional procedures, rules and practices detrimental to its equality and inclusivity commitments. Our findings highlight the fragility of much of the EP's gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity *acquis*, as well as tensions between formal commitments and daily (informal) procedures and practices. We conclude by outlining implications for prospects of gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive futures in the EU in the face of anti-gender contestations.

Keywords: Anti-gender mobilization, European Parliament, gender-sensitive parliaments, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ inclusivity

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1. Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) was often characterized as a supranational equality promoter pushing for progressive gender and LGBTQIA+ politics in the European Union (EU) (Ahrens et al., 2023; van der Vleuten, 2019; Ayoub, 2016; Swiebel, 2009). Yet, this image is increasingly challenged by the changing political landscape, turning the EP into “a contradictory forerunner” (Kantola & Lombardo, 2023). In this article we discuss specific vulnerabilities and threats the EP's *equality acquis* currently experiences given the growing number of conservative, radical right and populist parties in the EP, and whether its (in)formal rules and practices can protect

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gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity measures (Ahrens et al., 2022; Kantola, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2023).

Anti-gender actors create political projects opposing progressive gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity politics (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). They target gender equality and anti-discrimination policies, gender mainstreaming, sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, sex and gender education, etc. Propagated by the Vatican and evangelical groups, but also by radical right and conservative parties and groups, the term anti-gender actors comprises a broad range. We use the terms anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors, as we deem them more precise, next to the more generic term anti-gender actors.

We interrogate the vulnerabilities of and threats to the EP's *equality acquis* given anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors and discourses through a state-of-the-art literature study, which we combine with research on the international norm of a gender sensitive parliament (GSP). GSPs are conceptualized as political institutions that aim to change their (in)formal dimensions to value and prioritize gender equality by transforming their institutional culture, practice, and outputs (Childs & Palmieri, 2023). We analyse where and how along the four dimensions of this international GSP norm the EP could be vulnerable to (populist) radical right and other conservative strategies to exploit institutional procedures, rules and practices to the detriment of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights commitments.

While extant research focused on gender sensitivity, we extend it to comprise both gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. First, sensitivity to gender alone is not sufficient for a parliament to meet standards of equality and inclusivity. Second, anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as progressive gender issues (which also justifies replacing the term anti-gender by a broader one; cf. Roggeband et al., 2025). While we stick to the predominant term GSP, we emphasize our understanding of gender as intersectional and reaching beyond a binary men/women construction, let alone a cisgender heteronormative definition of it (Ahrens & Meier, 2024). Having said that, we refer to both gender and LGBTQIA+ issues in our analysis, as LGBTQIA+ issues cannot be reduced to a subset of gender issues.

We first trace the history of the EP as a gender and LGBTQIA+ politics promotor. Next, we introduce the GSP concept and outline the four dimensions along which we approach the EP, adding LGBTQIA+ sensitivity. The subsequent four sections each address one of these four dimensions, namely representation, policy-making, participation of civil society and other actors, and parliament as a work organization. The article concludes by outlining the implications for prospects of gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive futures in the EU in the face of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ contestations.

2. The EP as gender and LGBTQIA+ politics promotor

Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights have been embedded in the EU treaties with important extensions over time (Jacquot, 2015; Lomazzi & Crespi, 2019; Thiel, 2021). The Treaty of Rome (1957) introduced Article 119 on the principle of equal remuneration for equal work, later used by the Commission and the European Court of Justice to develop employment and social policy provisions extensively impacting member states (van der Vleuten, 2007). This, however, tied gender equality to employment and social policy, where the EP had no say originally, while LGBTQIA+ politics remained limited to soft law (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016). The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) changed this by introducing gender mainstreaming (Article 3.2) and anti-discrimination provisions (Article 13), including sexual orientation, followed by further developments such as the 2000 EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR). Together, the changes altered EU governance and shaped the image of the EU as a global gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights promotor (Abels et al., 2021; Mos, 2013; Thiel, 2021).

The EP plays a central role in this EU equality governance. Strengthened institutionally and legally by the Treaty of Lisbon 2007 (in effect 2009), it became an increasingly fierce defender of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (Jacquot, 2015; Ayoub, 2016; Swiebel, 2009; van der Vleuten, 2019). Its actual power to act, however, remained constrained by largely indifferent or regressive positions under Commission Presidents Barroso and Juncker (Abels & Mushaben, 2020), despite constant civil society mobilization (Lang, 2021).

The EP's supranational character is unique: with 720 members (MEPs) directly elected every five years since 1979 through proportional list representation in its (by the time of writing this article) 27 member states, it is, after India, the second largest parliamentary assembly. EP political groups (conglomerates of national parties organized mainly along political affinity) are reconstituted after each election. Unlike many national parliaments, the EP cannot formally initiate legislation and acts as co-legislator with the Council of the EU, while legislative initiative remains with the European Commission.

Women's representation consistently increased until 2024, peaking at 40.5 % in 2019, placing the EP in the gender-balance zone (40–60 % women and men). This was considered “a mixed blessing” though, due to growing numbers of women MEPs in Eurosceptic and (populist) radical right political groups such as Identity & Democracy (ID), which promoted anti-equality agendas (Abels & Mushaben, 2020). The decrease to 39.5 % after the 2024 elections marks the first regression in the EP's history (Abels, 2025). Women's representation differs across the political groups but ranges usually between the so-called one-third-critical-mass and parity during the current legislature (see table 1). While some MEPs from a Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) minority are known, no official data exists.

Traditionally analysed along socio-economic left–right and integration–demarcation cleavages (Hix et al., 2007), the EP is increasingly structured by the TAN–GAL divide, which is particularly salient for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (Hooghe et al., 2002; Brack, 2018; Ahrens & Kantola, 2023). Morality politics cuts across political groups (Mondo & Close, 2018). The TAN dimension comprises the European People’s Party (EPP), the Patriots for Europe (Pfe), the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), alongside many MEPs not belonging to any political group (NI). The Progressive Alliance of European Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (RE), the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), and the Left Group (GUE/ NGL) belong to the GAL dimension. The four political groups along the TAN dimension currently hold substantial seat shares in the 2024 EP (see table 1). We come back to this in section 4.

Table 1: Political Groups and Women’s Representation in the European Parliament, 2024

	EPP	S&D	Pfe	ECR	RE	Greens/ EFA	GUE/ NGL	ESN	NI
MEPs (n)*	188	136	84	78	77	53	46	25	32
Seat share in %	26.1	18.9	11.7	10.8	10.7	7.4	6.4	3.5	4.5
Women’s share in %	36.7	42.7	42.8	36.7	44.2	50.9	45.7	32.0	31.2

Source: N=719, 1 empty seat; Own Source

Over time, the EP continuously institutionalized gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. Its key gender equality body established in 1979 is the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), (Ahrens, 2016; Nugent, 2019). Since 2003, the EP adopted several gender mainstreaming resolutions and extended breadth and depth continuously, monitored and advanced by the FEMM committee (Ahrens, 2019; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Shreeves & Hahnkamper-Vandenbulcke, 2021). LGBTQIA+ politics became more institutionalised since 1997 with the creation of the LGBTQIA+ Intergroup, an informal MEP network that nevertheless increased visibility through resolutions and reports (Ayoub, 2016). In 2004, the EP established the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) to oversee anti-discrimination policies, though its focus remains broader, prioritising rule of law and fundamental rights over LGBTQIA+ issues.

Commissioner hearings represent another key EP instrument for advancing gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights, as MEPs’ questioning has led to replacements and rejections of Commissioners (Abels, 2019). The EP also engaged in gender and sexuality politics through resolutions, for instance urging the Commission to defend gender equality and sexual rights in Poland and subsequently Hungary (European Parliament, 2021a,b).

Against this history, we analyse where the EP leaves loopholes and could be vulnerable to anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ attacks. Moving beyond immediate developments, we adopt a holistic view of the EP as a political institution, recognising that gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity can be contested not only at the policy level but across multiple institutional layers. To address complexity, we analyse the EP through the GSP norm which encompasses diverse parliamentary dimensions determining whether, and to what extent, gender equality and – in our case – LGBTQIA+ inclusivity are embedded as constitutive features of parliamentary practices.

3. GSPs: adding LGBTQIA+ inclusivity to an emerging international norm

Gendered representation in politics and policies was predominantly researched along Pitkin's (1967) classic distinction of formalistic (institutional rules and procedures), descriptive (numerical share), substantive (opportunities of interest articulation and responsiveness in policy processes), and symbolic (visual and spatial "standing for", including affects) representation (cf. e.g. Krook, 2009; Palmieri, 2018; Paxton & Hughes 2016), with the three representative dimensions mutually co-constitutive (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Montoya et al., 2022). Extant parliamentary research provides rich analyses of political equality strategies like gender mainstreaming, the gendered impact of (in)formal rules from an institutionalist perspective (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay, 2014), and, more recently, symbolic representation (Rai & Spary, 2019; Verge, 2022a,b). Erikson and Verge (2022) demonstrate that parliaments, when conceptualized as workplaces, require a specific angle accounting for issues like selection and recruitment policies; workplace rules, routines and practices; reconciling work and care responsibilities; well-being requirements and policies; codes of conduct, etc. (see also Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

Building on such insights, GSPs are an emerging international norm mainly promoted by international organizations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2011), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2019), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA, 2001; Smith, 2022) or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Palmieri, 2021). It transcends tools increasing women's descriptive or substantive representation and echoes extant research approaching parliaments as gendered organizations and workplaces functioning with (in)formal rules and routines that can either constrain or promote gender equality in their structures, decision-making, and policy-making (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Palmieri et al., 2021). Childs and Palmieri (2023, 177) provide the most recent and comprehensive definition of GSPs: "A gender sensitive parliament values and prioritizes gender equality as a social, econo-

mic, and political objective, and reorients and transforms their institutional culture, practice, and outputs towards those objectives”.

Although there are differences in the order and specific content of GSPs’ dimensions, research defined roughly four dimensions (Childs, 2016, 2017; Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Palmieri et al., 2021; Smith, 2022), which we summarize in the middle column of table 2.

Table 2: Dimensions of a GSP and a Gender and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament

Dimension	GSP	Gender and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament
Equal representation in parliaments	relates to descriptive representation and captures equal access to and representation within the parliament, e.g., parity in leadership positions, committee membership, etc; includes overcoming a gender binary understanding of equality and addressing intersectional aspects, particularly along race, class, age	descriptive representation within parliament, committees and leadership positions, of MPs from different intersectional genders/gender identities and sexual orientation mirroring their share in the population; while gender identity and sexual orientation may not be known, a sensitivity to a descriptive representation of intersectional genders/gender identities, and diverse sexual orientations, at all levels, would help to meet this dimension
Equality in policy-making	relates to substantive representation and comprises the main duties of parliaments: legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and ensuring policies address and reduce intersectional gender inequalities	substantive representation of intersectional LGBTQIA+ inclusivity along with gender equality in policies; legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and other main tasks of parliament should be fulfilled in a way that policies address and reduce intersectional gender and LGBTQIA+ inequalities
Equal participation of societal interests	relates to both descriptive and substantive representation in connection with the broader public, e.g., experts, movements, and civil society in hearings and through other participatory tools	connecting with diverse experts, movements, and civil society from both the feminist and the LGBTQIA+ fields in hearings and through other participatory tools
Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization	mainly relates to symbolic representation, i.e., discussion styles, rituals, language, childcare facilities, but also room names and art, etc; it also leaps into descriptive and substantive representation, with topics like parental leave or pregnancy or securing a violence-free (working) environment for all	symbolic representation of intersectional gender identities and sexual orientation along with gender, but especially also the consideration of the needs and interests of MPs and employees with different intersectional gender identities and from sexual minorities when it comes to parliament as a work organization

Source: Own Source

While the GSP norm builds on knowledge developed through research on gendered politics and policies, we contend it can – and should – be expanded to LGBTQIA+ sensitivity. There is a more recent and less comprehensive, but nonetheless flourishing amount of research investigating the representation by and of members of the LGBTQIA+ community (cf. Bönisch, 2022; Chaney, 2013; Juvonen, 2016; Magni

& Reynolds, 2021; Tremblay, 2019). There are nuances between the two strands of research, but both underline the benefits of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation of MPs with a diverse range of socio-demographic features, including gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. In the right column of table 2 we conceptualize how we extend the GSP norm to LGBTQIA+ sensitivity.

We tackle these four dimensions of a gender- and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament in the following four sections. This is our first innovative perspective on the use of the GSP norm: to add LGBTQIA+ sensitivity to its four dimensions. Also, the GSP norm is usually applied to contexts where there is commitment and less so when there is the potential of deteriorating previous achievements. This is our second innovative perspective on the use of this norm: to apply it to a case which was considered relatively safe for gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive politics and work conditions, but might no longer be so. As there is more research on gender than on LGBTQIA+ issues related to the EP, our analysis will not be fully balanced. We nonetheless hope to convincingly show the challenges anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors can pose for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in the EP.

4. Equal representation

With women MEPs' share close to 40 %, the EP globally performs comparatively well regarding descriptive representation, the first GSP dimension (Palmieri et al., 2021). Nonetheless, disparities persist across countries, political groups, and the parties within them (Chiva, 2019; Frech, 2024, 2025). Greens/EFA and the Left maintain strong formal commitments and parity, especially in leadership, while S&D and RE – despite articulated commitment – lack formal rules, rendering gender equality negotiable and often disadvantaging women. Conservative and right-wing groups reject formal rules and fail to achieve gender-equal ranks and leadership (Ahrens & Kantola, 2023; Kantola & Miller, 2022). Member states without gender quotas usually arrive with very low women's representation (except for Sweden and Finland), though some feature a more gender-balanced EP delegation than in their national parliament due to greater career incentives for MPs than MEPs (Xydias, 2016). No data exists on MEPs from a SOGI minority, but the EP is not a microcosm of society when it comes to social markers.

Ample literature explains women's and other social groups under-representation (Frech, 2025; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2014, 2015). After the 2024 elections, partisan fragmentation increased with 195 national parties represented (previously 184), averaging 3.7 MEPs per party, and many holding only one or two seats (Abels, 2025). The increase in often male-dominated "single-seat parties" (driven by small national delegations and party system fracturing in low-threshold systems of larger member states) unfolds severe gendered implications, making parity unlikely (ibid.). While resisting equality-promoting measures is common, the

rise of anti-gender actors certainly intensifies it and reduces chances to adopt parity regulation in the suggested EP electoral reforms.

Two supplementary problems for equal representation occur with the rise of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+ parties. First, equal representation requires traceable socio-demographic features. Citizens' registries trace women and men MEPs numbers but predominantly captures binary and cisgender male/female MEP classifications (sex assigned at birth). Some countries recently broadened their understanding and registry of gender identities, steered by pronoun use and other social identifiers, making recognizing diverse gender identities easier. However, higher numbers of TAN parties who often explicitly define gender as cisgender male/female assigned by birth may shrink or even reverse progress. Hence, MEPs may feel verbally, physically, politically, and legally (even) less safe to reveal a non-cisgender identity than in the recent past, rendering EP gender diversity increasingly invisible.

Sexual orientation is even harder to capture: not officially registered, awareness of MEPs from sexual minorities depends on voluntarily coming out. Given growing criticism, ridicule, or fear of punishment, non-re-election, or even violence, fewer may feel safe to come out reducing further visibility of the EP's diversity in sexual orientation. Although lacking legislation to promote gender equality and an adequate SOGI representation, a generally tolerant climate in some member states allowed the EP to appear gender- and SOGI-friendly. The harshening climate with virulent and growing influence of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ parties reveals how shallow this surface tolerance likely is, and exposes the EP's vulnerability to anti-gender mobilization.

This amplifies the second problem of substantive representation. While not automatic, research proposes MEPs stand for their representatives, and shared socio-demographics increase this likelihood (Philipps, 1995). Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity issues thus largely rely on engaged women and LGBTQIA+ MEPs (Dodeigne et al., 2025; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). The changed EP composition likely exacerbates their vulnerability and makes them targets of growing hostility, creating a trapping vicious circle (Meier & Verlooy, 2026): If they stay silent, progress stalls; but if they speak up, they may face verbal and/or physical violence and political and/or legal punishment.

Although even an EP with low women's representation can function as gender equality promoter if progressive forces use their power effectively, the rise of anti-gender actors and the increasing politicization of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity within the EP impedes the FEMM committee to enact change towards gender equality (Ahrens et al., 2023). Anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors increasingly use the EP as arena, with radical right populists relying on traditional gender imaginaries to explicitly oppose equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021a,b). This is facilitated by the EP's limited dominant understanding of the term gender, where even in the FEMM committee gender is quasi exclusively used to refer

to homogenous groups of cisgender (heterosexual) men and women, while intersectional perspectives or positions challenging this gender binary are exceptional (Zimmermann, 2019).

Finally, when the EPP gives up the *cordon sanitaire* (Brack, 2018), the four political groups along the TAN dimension hold with 375 seats the majority (52 %) to adopt legislation, while the GAL political groups lack it (312 seats or 43.3 %) without EPP. The recent vote of the EPP with the radical right to cut green spending and monitoring rules set a key precedent in this respect (Gros & Griera, 2025), which may, in a later stage, also apply to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity issues.

Lacking hard law and procedures, a socio-demographic division of the political labour of representation, the limited understanding of the term gender, and a majority along the TAN dimension, eases anti-gender actors' efforts to pressure against equal descriptive representation. Anti-gender mobilization exploits existing flaws and weaknesses regarding equal representation sensitive to gender identities and diverse sexual orientations.

5. Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in policy-making

Facilitating the substantive representation of diverse groups of women and LGBTQIA+ people is a second GSP dimension. It appears through policy-making, comprising legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and ensuring policies address and reduce gender and intersectional inequalities (Catalano Weeks, 2022; Joshi & Echle, 2023). GSPs require to “mandate an appropriate parliamentary body (or all parliamentary bodies) to undertake gender sensitive oversight” (Palmieri et al., 2021, 11). Such bodies rely on feminist critical actors, gender-focused parliamentary committees or working groups, individual feminist or LGBTQIA+ MPs, (cross-party) women's or LGBTQIA+ caucuses and committed staff (Childs, 2023; Chaney, 2006; Grace & Sawyer, 2016; Sawyer, 2020). Particularly gender-focused bodies have facilitated integrating gender perspectives into legislative processes (Sawyer, 2020; Sawyer et al., 2014) and, if equipped with enforcement mechanisms, can change rules, norms, and organizational memory (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2024).

The FEMM exemplifies these challenges. While it oversees EU gender equality policy, it lacks formal power to impose gender issues across committees, relying instead on informal institutional power play (Ahrens et al., 2023; Ahrens, 2016; Nugent, 2019). The “Union of Equality” agenda pursued by Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in her first term (2019–2024) provided important opportunities for the EP's substantive engagement with gender equality and LGBTQIA+ policies. The FEMM was exceptionally active and acted as lead committee for several directives, though its powers were constrained by compromise pressure in inter-institutional negotiations. Negotiating the Directive on combating violence against

women and domestic violence (European Union, 2024) showed, for instance, that even if the Commission and the EP agree on progressive policies, the Council can block them, revealing the limits of parliamentary gender mainstreaming in contested policy areas (Berthet & Rolandsen Agustín, 2025).

Despite its importance, particularly during the last legislature, the FEMM repeatedly faced abandonment threats – blocked in previous centre-group EP compositions but more likely to materialise under a strong TAN majority (Jacquot, 2015; Kantola & Lombardo, 2023). Moreover, even if not dissolved, interinstitutional negotiations reveal ambivalences: the FEMM depends on political group support and these likely shift to a more conservative positioning with a strong TAN majority in both EP and Council. Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ politics falling under the LIBE Committee's broader anti-discrimination remit even lack comprehensive legislative proposals although the LGBTIQ+ Intergroup, while without formal power, considerably increased issue visibility with EP resolutions and reports (Ayoub, 2016).

Regarding mainstreaming gender in policy-making, the FEMM continuously institutionalized it since 2003 (Ahrens, 2019; Shreeves & Hahnkamper-Vandenbulcke, 2021). The actor's network responsible for it broadened over time: next to one appointed MEP in each committee which form the Gender Mainstreaming Network with regular meetings, MEPs from EP delegations, and, since 2019, EP secretariat staff participate. Since 2019, the EP Rules of Procedure (EPRoP) which guide parliamentary work, include gender mainstreaming in Rule 249, and oblige since 2020 committees to adopt a Gender Action Plan.

Committee-level implementation resistance persists, and gender mainstreaming rules are frequently sidelined, especially in male-dominated committees like ECON and AFCD (Elomäki, 2021; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022). Seldenthuis (2024) found women MEPs advocate considerably for gender perspectives in early legislative stages by proposing amendments, but the effect diminishes in the legislative process. The FEMM committee's influence relies often on informal feminist networks and micro-political strategies such as cross-committee alliances and "Trojan Horse" tactics (Elomäki & Kantola, 2023). Moreover, the Gender Action Plans reveal gender equality is often still (mis)understood solely as a matter of gender parity (interlaced with gendered stereotypes) rather than addressing gendered policy aspects (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022).

LGBTQIA+ issues lack a similar institutionalization, although the EP engages considerably in LGBTQIA+ policy-making. The EP successfully urged the Commission to include gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights in the rule-of-law infringement procedures against Poland and Hungary (European Parliament, 2021a,b). Yet, the power of the LIBE committee and the LGBTIQ+ Intergroup remain limited, given anti-discrimination policy (including on sexual orientation) falls under the unanimity rule in the Council. The EP shift to the right after the 2024 elections,

together with the more right-wing Council, likely further decreases policy-making on LGBTQIA+ issues.

Established FEMM and LGBTIQ+ Intergroup tactics may fail increasingly in shaping EP policy-making, thereby reducing the substantive representation of these topics. The ideological opposition culminating in TAN groups allows procedural obstruction and makes gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity efforts increasingly vulnerable in legislative negotiations and committee hierarchies. Likewise, the political groups' approach to mainstreaming gender reflects the GAL–TAN divide (Ahrens & Meier, 2024; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). Greens/EFA operate with an extensive internal gender mainstreaming plan, and the Left also adopted formal structures. The more centre parliamentary groups (EPP, S&D, RE) lack formal commitment while the radical right and populist political groups (now ECR, PöF, ESN) reject it (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022).

The institutional setting – committee resistance, political group approaches – may make the EP lose ground regarding its strong gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights positioning in the current legislature. Previously, ECR and ID (now PöF) mobilized around EP debates and policy-making on the Istanbul Convention, reproductive rights, gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity strategies (Ahrens et al., 2022; Berthet, 2022b,c). They consistently framed gender as an externally imposed “ideology” threatening national sovereignty, traditional family structures, and religious values by promoting same-sex parenting and reproductive rights (Berthet, 2022b,c). Their parliamentary questions and plenary statements also contested EU competence over what they define as moral or cultural matters, insisting such topics should remain under national jurisdiction (Mondo & Close, 2018). So-called blue cards (asking or commenting on another MEPs' speech) were already harnessed by radical right populist MEPs to normalise “bad manners” and to distance themselves from the “politically correct establishment” of European politics (Kantola & Miller, 2021). The growing normalization of such rhetorics, particularly in plenary debates, risks reframing gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights as controversial or “foreign” agendas. The TAN majority could thus translate into systematically impeding gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights mechanisms across committees and legislation.

6. Equal participation of societal interests

A core parliamentary function is representing and engaging with the diversity of societal interests. In the GSP context, this encompasses connecting with the broader public, e.g., experts, social movements, and civil society organisations (CSOs) in hearings and through other participatory tools (Palmieri et al., 2021). Many parliaments allow creating additional informal bodies such as cross-party, single-party, or “friendship” groups on specific topics. In such groups, membership relies on interests and not parliamentary proportional representation rules. Often, groups

directly cooperate with CSOs. Parliamentary bodies with established CSO connections can improve attending to gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, because consulting with communities on lived experiences is a key aspect of parliamentary (committee) work. Some parliaments organize events together with civil society to guarantee their research and expertise are considered in the design and evaluation of policies and programs (Palmieri et al., 2021).

Connecting with broader societal interests by inviting CSOs, interest group representatives and (academic) experts to committee hearings or through liaising in Intergroups is common EP practice (Abels & Klöckner, 2025; Ayoub, 2016; Crespy & Parks, 2019). Hearings in the FEMM and LIBE committees play an important role in shaping the policy agenda and positioning the EP vis-à-vis the Commission and the Council (Ahrens & Woodward, 2020).

Yet, this also opens venues for anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors, who for more than a decade continuously extended their repertoire and their networks outside and inside the EP. One of the first and well-known cases of their impact in the EP was the 2012 European Citizens' Initiative 'One of Us', which claimed to organise around human embryonic stem cells research but factually mobilised against reproductive rights, specifically abortion. After collecting one million signatures and forcing a public EP hearing, organisers attempted to exclude opponents (Crespy & Parks, 2019). This was closely followed by mobilizing against the 2013 Estrela-Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, where similar religious and right-wing networks used an online petition, spammed the EP rapporteurs with emails, and attracted support of MEPs from EPP, ECR, and Europe of Nations and Freedom (by now PfiE) to replace the originally progressive version (Ahrens & Woodward, 2020).

While European Citizens' Initiatives were not utilised lately, transnational networks of conservative, religious, and nationalist actors adapted strategically to EP institutional rules, cultivated alliances with selected MEPs from EPP, ECR, ID (predecessor of PfiE and, partly, ESN), and reframed claims around family, freedom, and tradition (Mariani, 2025; Mos & Rubio Grundell, 2025; Ahrens et al., 2022). Well-resourced, they increasingly use public hearings, amendments, and coalition-building to amplify their EP presence (Mariani, 2025; Gilby & Koivusalo, 2024). Rather than dismantling equality norms directly, they dilute, delay, or reframe them, reshaping the EP's institutional equality culture. By invoking religious freedom, disability rights, or family values, they present themselves as conventional human rights actors and cooperate with EP Intergroups on "Demography", "Children's Rights" and "Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience" (Mos & Rubio Grundell, 2025). Despite the EP's formal commitment to equality, anti-gender actors exploit institutional openness and informal parliamentary channels to strength-

en networks, increase visibility, and gradually normalize their agendas (Mariani, 2025; Mos & Rubio Grundell, 2025).

With the EPP “sitting on the fence” (Ahrens et al., 2022), EP majorities may easily shift towards stronger reframing of equality issues and further restrict access for progressive equality CSOs. These effects are already visible, as the EWL and ILGA Europe have moved towards more informal participation channels to avoid polarisation and conflict (Ahrens & Woodward, 2020).

The substantial growth in TAN MEPs is mirrored in their increased presence in the FEMM and LIBE committees due to proportionality rules, shaping not only future EP positions but also which experts and organisations are invited to hearings. Inviting more conservative, religious, and nationalist actors risks undermining promoting equality as core democratic value. If the FEMM committee would be abandoned, ties with women’s and feminist CSOs could be cut. Similar dynamics apply to Intergroups: declining participation in the LGBTIQ+ Intergroup or rising MEP numbers in conservative Intergroups would shift power over EP resolutions.

Recent institutional reforms further illustrate how civil society access is increasingly contested. In 2025, EPP, ECR, and PöE established an EP Scrutiny Working Group under the Budgetary Control Committee to oversee the European Commission funding of NGOs and CSOs. The new EP body was established together by EPP, ECR, and PöE. Officially framed as enhancing transparency, GAL groups criticize it as a “Committee of Inquiry light” aimed at delegitimising NGOs active in environmental, human rights, and equality policies (Lehmann, 2025). Given new EP majorities, scrutiny could be applied selectively to disadvantage feminist and LGBTQIA+ organizations, while anti-gender actors remain unaffected due to alternative funding sources. Simultaneously, EU funding has increasingly flowed to these actors: a 2024 investigation revealed the Erasmus+ programme awarded €1.2 million to the World Youth Alliance (WYA), widely known for anti-abortion mobilization, including in women’s reproductive health projects (Norris, 2024). Despite several MEPs formally questioning consistency with EU funding values, it illustrates how anti-gender actors gained legitimacy and institutional resources through EU programmes, with the EP lacking either the power or political will to prevent such funding.

7. Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization

Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization relate to symbolic representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Verge, 2022a,b), which is crucial to a GSP (Palmieri et al., 2021). Parliaments, like other male-dominated organizations, are permeated by a culture of masculinity, reflected in the formal rules and informal norms of how a (male) politician should behave, and rendering feminine political styles less legitimate while increasing expectations towards women’s perfor-

mance (Lovenduski, 2005). Likewise, parliaments are imprinted with a heteronormative architecture supporting a binary gender concept, for instance, when toilets are only assigned as female or male (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024; Childs, 2017), as is also the case in the EP.

GSP research on this dimension focused mainly on (1) whether parliaments are family-friendly (given women as main caregivers) and (2) tackling inappropriate behaviour such as condescending, sexist, racist or homo- and transphobe comments, hate speech, and sexual harassment. Driven mainly by centre-left political groups and women MEPs, the EP addressed – even if sometimes hesitantly – both topics.

Politics are characterized by a “motherhood penalty” with women often entering politics later than men, having fewer children, and facing unequal care burdens (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Franceschet et al., 2016; Joshi & Goehrung, 2021). Long commutes, irregular working hours, and the absence of comprehensive parental leave weigh disproportionately on mothers and reinforce gendered obstacles. Extant research focused on mothers and how they accommodate care responsibilities, but recently also fathers and parents moved into focus (Franceschet et al., 2024; Frech & Kopsch, 2024; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). Some parliaments address this demanding and time-intensive character of parliamentary work, especially for people with caregiving roles. They discontinue night sittings, align schedules with school calendars, allow for proxy voting and flexible working hours, provide financial support for care duties, or temporary replacements during maternity, parental, or other forms of leave (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024).

Family-friendliness in the EP is confronted with a complex setting: While the EU adopted directives on maternity and parental leave, these exclude MEPs, whose mandates are considered personal and nontransferable (Frech, 2024; Frech & Kopsch, 2024). Some member states like Sweden offer parental leave rights in their national assemblies, others, like Poland or Germany, not (Lecerf, 2025). Yet, national rules are not enforced supranationally, because the EP operates with its own MEP Statute, and parental leave regulations could only be introduced by revising the statute. Past reform attempts failed, given the diverse traditions and political sensitivities around family policy (Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

The EP offers only limited provisions. Since 2008, mothers giving birth can be excused from meetings for up to nine months, but this excludes other parents (Frech & Kopsch, 2024; Lecerf, 2025). Leave provisions are further undermined, because the MEP cannot (temporarily) be replaced and – despite being used during the Covid-19 pandemic – remote voting is forbidden, bringing MEPs potentially in conflict with political group demands (Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

MEPs with children, especially mothers, have continuously lobbied for formal parental leave, remote voting, and temporary vote transfers (Frech & Kopsch, 2024). The 2022 proposed European Electoral Act reform included offering tem-

porary replacement “during maternity leave by the next candidate on the relevant list for a 16-week renewable period (Article 27(7) – Vacancies)” (Lecerf, 2025, 3). Yet, this reform likely fails, because it requires a unanimous vote in the Council and the consent of all member states.

In 2023, 13 MEPs launched a “Motherhood Manifest” to adopt parental leave, temporary leave and greater voting flexibility, but EP leadership responded cautiously. When three pregnant MEPs renewed the call in 2025, EP President Roberta Metsola tasked the EP’s Bureau to propose reforms. However, despite Metsola speaking of “parenthood” the reforms only address maternity leave, neglecting fathers and other co-parents. A related revision proposal for the European Electoral Act (independent of the 2022 proposed reform) called upon member states to introduce proxy voting with MEPs delegating their vote to another MEP. The European Parliament legislative resolution of 13 November 2025 on the amendment of the European Electoral act allows MEPs now to vote in plenary by proxy voting during pregnancy and after giving birth (European Parliament, 2025). Here, too, Metsola pointed out that the reforms target mothers, not fathers or transgender parents (Lecerf, 2025). This neglects the rights of LGBTQIA+ families. The currently achieved standard potentially deteriorates if support for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity measures diminishes among the TAN majority, because many provisions are not formally institutionalized. They can thus be undermined or abandoned if support is majority withdrawn. If the right-leaning EP leadership tightens attendance rules or reduces childcare support, it could further erode the limited rights.

Inappropriate behaviour, particularly sexual harassment is workplace violence and endemic to politics (Collier & Raney, 2018; Krook, 2018). Research shows women MPs, particularly young women, face more pressure, anxiety, and negative treatment than their male colleagues, while young men are least affected (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019, 2021; IPU, 2018). The #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements helped bringing issues of sexual harassment, sexism, and racism to parliamentary agendas, prompting many parliaments, among them the EP, to adopt new codes of conduct (Berthet, 2022a).

Despite the revised EP RoP in 2006/07, the EP long addressed harassment only superficially. The Anti-harassment Committee, created in 2014, lacked training, handled no cases by 2019, and imposed only financial sanctions, often relocating complainants instead of disciplining MEPs (Berthet & Kantola, 2021). In 2017, EP staff launched *MeTooEP* and demanded implementing the EP’s own 2017 Resolution (European Parliament, 2017), by introducing mandatory training, reforming the Anti-harassment Committee, and conducting an external audit. The campaign organisers – despite visibility and access to institutional platforms as insiders – clashed with the Anti-harassment Committee, the EP Secretariat and the Bureau,

who curbed reforms and prioritized an EP image as “good institution” (Berthet, 2022a).

In 2024, however, the EP leaped forward by changing Rule 11 “Standards of Conduct” of the EP RoP. Subclause 6 requires MEPs to sign a conduct declaration and complete mandatory training within six months on preventing conflict and harassment in the workplace. If failing, MEPs “may not be elected as office-holders of Parliament or one of its bodies”, including functions like rapporteur, delegation member or in interinstitutional negotiations. EPP, ECR, and ID originally announced to vote against the proposal, but it passed. The EP now faces new challenges: formal rules and resolutions exist, yet enforcement is weak and accountability minimal, especially, because the EP RoP can be changed with a simple majority – one that currently the TAN political groups hold.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we interrogated the vulnerabilities and threats the EP *equality acquis* experiences given the growing number of anti-gender actors and discourses in the EP. We built on the emerging international GSP norm, expanding it to also cover LGBTQIA+ sensitivity. Our contribution is threefold. First, we included LGBTQIA+ sensitivity in the GSP framework, because sensitivity to gender alone is insufficient to meet equality and inclusivity standards given anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as gender issues. Future research should conceptually refine and empirically explore this extended framework. Second, we provided an innovative perspective by applying this framework to the paradigmatic EP case. The GSP framework is usually applied to contexts where there is commitment rather than the potential of previous achievements deteriorating. We demonstrate it can also be applied to cases which were considered relatively safe for gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive politics and work conditions, but might no longer be so. Hence, we suggest using the GSP framework prospectively more flexibly for cases initially appearing stable regarding promoting gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. Third, we conducted a detailed review of how the EP has developed along the different dimensions of this framework, and unpack specific vulnerabilities and threats it currently experiences given the growing number of conservative, radical right and populist parties in the EP. As the latter is the case in many parliaments, we strongly encourage to combine both research strands in future research to illuminate how the four GSP dimensions interact when facing opposition.

Analyzing where and how along the four dimensions of a gender and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament the EP could be vulnerable to anti-gender actors’ strategies to exploit institutional procedures, rules and practices to the detriment of the EP’s gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights commitments, our conclusion is twofold. First, the EP’s gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity *acquis* is not sufficiently anchored. It has been only partially supported by formal rules, especially when

it comes to the dimensions of equal representation and of parliament as a work organization, and many rather traditional perspectives on gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity prevail. This facilitates anti-gender actors putting the existing *acquis* under pressure by exploiting existing flaws and weaknesses. Second, and logically, anti-gender actors can use the same tools as progressive MEPs and political groups to make their points and claims. This is especially visible when it comes to the dimensions of policy-making and the participation of civil society and other relevant actors, but is also visible in the equal representation dimension, where anti-gender actors increasingly claim presence. While democratic parliamentary systems are designed to accommodate shifting majorities, declining support for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights raises normative concerns because Article 2 TEU frames equality, human rights and non-discrimination as foundational EU values rather than optional policy priorities.

Facing anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ contestations, the prospects for an inclusive EU are rather bleak and it might lose ground in pushing for progressive EU equality policies. Institutional arrangements – rules, procedures, and practices – to enable gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity may even point to limited institutional resilience when core equality norms depend strongly on political majorities rather than entrenched procedures. That the EP was long characterized as progressive gender and LGBTQIA+ politics promoter is rather due to its composition and MEPs leeway to strive for such politics. Progressivity lacks enshrinement in formal rules and practices and this makes the EP gender equality and LGBTQIA+ *acquis* vulnerable to anti-gender attacks. Thus, current developments are shaped by lacking a structural lack of deep commitment by the EP and the EU at large to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

Overall, we conclude the (still emerging) international norm of GSPs deserves more attention both in contexts with commitment and when there is the potential of deteriorating previous achievements. Furthermore, broadening its four dimensions to comprehend both gender- and LGBTQIA+ sensitivity is crucial given anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as progressive gender issues. Our review was limited to the EP, but future research should – next to single case studies – approach parliaments comparatively to detect similarities, differences and patterns and how the four GSP dimensions interact in such different institutional settings.

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