

Study questions European Parliament's perception as champion of gender equality

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Image is from a recent seminar that the research project EUGenDem organized in the European Parliament on these topics. The pictures show academics debating the issue with MEPs, parliamentary staff, and an Inter-Parliamentary Union representative. Dr. Kantola is standing. Credit: François de Ribaucourt (David Plas Photography)

The European Parliament is often viewed as the most democratic and gender equal decision-making institution of the European Union. A new *Journal of Common Market Studies* article critically scrutinizes this assumption through an analysis of female members' perceptions.

The study analyses the gendered experiences of 18 female members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from two Nordic countries, Denmark and Finland. When Dr. Johanna Kantola, of Tampere University in Finland, and Dr. Lise Rolandsen Agustín, of Aalborg University in Denmark, interviewed these women, they found that the institutional culture of the European Parliament is characterized by [gender stereotypes](#) and different expectations towards male and female MEPs. For example, policy areas dominated by male MEPs are considered to be more prestigious, and female

MEPs are not expected to be experts on areas such as economic policies. Young female MEPs especially found it necessary to overcompensate, by working harder than others and emphasizing their 'strong character', in order to advance in their careers and get ahead in the power hierarchy.

"The European Parliament is not the clear champion of gender equality that we would like it to be; the shortcomings in the maternity/paternity leave rights within the Parliament, such as proxy voting, for instance, suggests an exclusionary character," said Dr. Kantola. "This results in MEPs feeling that they have to choose between a political career and motherhood or being faced with serious challenges in balancing work and family life when expectations towards them as politicians and as mothers collide."

The findings are being released at a time of pending elections, which take place every five years. "In face of the upcoming European Parliament elections in May 2019, it is relevant to underline how women and men are represented in the Parliament and how issues of gender equality are dealt with in the party groups," said Dr. Agustín. "When we look at the gender composition of the political groups at the leadership and coordinator level, we find that GUE/NGL and Greens/EFA are the most gender equal groups, followed by S&D and ALDE. The most gender unequal are EPP and ECR; however, the EPP group shows some recent practices to enhance gender equality within their group, through some provisions for [gender balanced representation](#) and informal women's networks."

More information: Johanna Kantola et al, Gendering the Representative Work of the European Parliament: A Political Analysis of Women MEP's Perceptions of Gender Equality in Party Groups, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12885](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12885)

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