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Mothers, Parliamentarians, Leaders: Career Factors Influencing Women's Representation in the European Parliament – A Case Study of German MEPs

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Abstract

The European Parliament (EP), often understood as being a relatively women - friendly institution, nevertheless still grapples with the problem of the under-representation of women, especially in powerful roles such as committee chairs. This article scrutinizes individual career factors leading German Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to Strasbourg and into leadership positions within the EP. It focuses on examining disparities between men and women and compares women with, and without, leadership experience in the offices of Political Group Leaders, Political Group Coordinators, Committee Chairs and Leadership of the Parliament. The primary objective is to discern how individual experiences and qualifications, such as previous political experience or education, along with more personal parameters, such as marital status and parental responsibilities, correlate with the positions and power women attain within the EP. Utilizing a comprehensive new dataset encompassing all German MEPs between 1999-2019, it finds a higher representation of women in leadership roles compared to their overall presence in the EP, albeit with disparities across office types and political affiliations. But the findings reveal two primary challenges faced by German women in the EP: a motherhood penalty, and potential hurdles on the way to leadership positions. On average, German women

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MEPs have fewer children than their male counterparts, and those with leadership experience are more likely to remain unmarried. Additionally, the data confirm occupational gender segregation concerning the formative occupations of MEPs, alongside equal political experience between men and women.

Introduction

On the subject of ‘people building Europe’, the earliest days of the European integration process were very much a male-dominated affair. There were only ever the ‘founding *fathers*’. The famous photograph of the signing of the Treaty of Rome in the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill in Rome shows a very large room entirely full of men. Of course, the situation has changed over time, although much progress remains to be made, particularly regarding membership of, and leadership in, the European Union’s institutions. On 8 March 2024 (International Women’s Day), the Council of the European Union published a list of ‘firsts’ for women in various leadership positions in the European Council and the Council. It showed, for example, that the Council had to wait until 2022 for its first female Secretary General to be appointed (Thérèse Blanchet).² The European Commission appointed its first female Secretary General in 2005 (Catherine Day) but had to wait until 2019 for its first female President to be elected (Ursula von der Leyen). The European Parliament (EP) elected its first female President in 1979 (Simone Veil), but there have been only two female presidents since (Nicole Fontaine and Roberta Metsola) and it has never yet appointed a female Secretary General.

Among the European Union institutions, the EP is, on gender-related matters, something of an enigma. It is the European Union’s representative body *par excellence* and therefore could perhaps be expected to best reflect and respect gender balance at both administrative and elected level. Indeed, the EP is considered relatively women-friendly with a deserved reputation as an institution fostering gender inclusivity not only at the administrative level. However, there remains a persistent imbalance in the number of women in leadership positions in the EP, whether regarding Presidencies and Vice-Presidencies, or the European party groups (EPGs), or the parliamentary committees (whether chairing or acting as group coordinator).

Surprisingly little is known about the career paths of the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (for example, Daniel, 2015, Marzi and Verzichelli 2023, Scarrow,

²<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/library/library-blog/posts/celebrating-international-women-s-day/>

1997) and even less about the political careers of its female members (for example, Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger 2022, Kantola and Agustin, 2019). The few recent studies on women's career paths to or entry into the EP highlight the role of the political parties (Kantola and Miller, 2022, Lühiste and Kenny, 2016) and hint towards the impact of electoral institutions (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger; 2014). However, detailed knowledge is lacking about the individual career prerequisites (for example, previous political experience) that might help in becoming an MEP, and the individual context (for example, if they have children) of women in the EP. To what extent can gender imbalance in political careers be imputed to explanatory factors?

This article seeks to make an initial modest step towards an exploration of women MEPs' career paths and some of the reasons why they might differ. It will study the individual career trajectories of a set of German MEPs and of the office holders among them, looking first to possible differences between women MEPs and their male colleagues. The additional comparison of the political careers of women MEPs with women MEPs occupying leadership positions, will seek to discover factors influencing women's trajectories within the institution.³ Indeed, it is this emphasis on trajectories and possible distinctive features and factors that places the article firmly in the context and approach of this special issue of *European Politics and Society*.

Gender scholars have argued that, because of, in general terms, an unequally shared responsibility of childcare, mothers who are also politicians face a double burden. Their maternal responsibilities, it is argued, cause women to enter politics later in life and cause women in political office to have fewer children than men (Franceschet et al., 2016; Murray, 2010). This inequality or disadvantage is commonly referred to as the 'motherhood penalty' and has been confirmed in various countries and parliaments (Franceschet et al., 2016; Joshi and Goehring, 2021).⁴ Using German women MEPs as a case study, this article will seek to determine whether such a motherhood penalty might exist in the EP, and whether that disadvantage is higher for women occupying leadership positions.

Furthermore, the paper will consider whether German women are equally qualified for success in the EP and whether an occupational gender segregation (see Charles and Grusky, 2004, Jarman et al., 2012) exists among MEPs. This study will consider the argument that women have to be better prepared and qualified for the EP and for

³ For an extensive analysis of women (but not their trajectories) in EP offices, see Kopsch, 2024.

⁴ While we know the motherhood penalty exists (Franceschet et al., 2016; Joshi and Goehring, 2021), it is unclear whether and to what degree it occurs due to mothers not running for office (i.e. self-selection) (Murray 2010) or due to 'imputed discrimination' or a discriminatory attitude by the (s)electorate (Crowder2013, Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

leadership positions within it relative to men because of the disadvantages they are said to face in selection (see Verge and Astudillo, 2019). If this is indeed the case, then it could be expected that such women would be particularly well educated and have the same or even more (pre-EP) political experience than their male counterparts.

Previous research on women's representation in the EP has highlighted a persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, and that despite the EP being considered more gender-friendly than many national parliaments, including the German Bundestag (Kantola 2010, Kopsch 2024). Analysing two decades of German MEPs revealed a slightly surprising finding; 38% of German MEPs who held leadership positions were women, just surpassing the 36.5% percent of female German MEPs. However, the likelihood of a German woman achieving such leadership varies by office type and political party affiliation.

As will be seen, the exploratory and descriptive analysis of individual career factors reveals two challenges for German women that could potentially be relevant for all women in the EP; there is indeed a motherhood penalty, and there are indeed barriers to securing leadership positions. German women in the sample, on average, have fewer children, and those in leadership roles are more likely to be childless compared to men. Furthermore, women in leadership positions are more inclined to remain unmarried, while men are predominantly married. These findings suggest that women who are parliamentarians may encounter difficulties balancing family and professional responsibilities, possibly necessitating prioritization. German women MEPs are *less* likely than their male counterparts to possess a high school diploma and an academic title. The descriptive analysis further confirms that women's initial occupations are more likely to be in social fields, while their male counterparts are more frequently trained as business administrators or engineers. When comparing German women MEPs with leadership experience to the overall group of German women, it becomes evident that women face a demanding threshold, especially in securing leadership roles; women in leadership positions are *more* likely to hold a high school diploma and possess previous political experience compared to their counterparts without such leadership roles.

The rest of this article is constructed as follows. First, a literature review will be used to generate a series of testable expectations. Second, the data base and its limitations will be described. Third, the results of the empirical study will be reported and used to test the expectations. Lastly, the conclusion will discuss the – sometimes counterintuitive – findings of the study and consider avenues for further research.

The political careers of women in the EP - what is known and what one might expect

This study investigates the political careers of women in the EP, focusing on the role of professional backgrounds, education, and personal parameters, including marital status and number of children. In so doing, it seeks to add to two broad areas of literature; the study of political careers of MEPs (for example, Daniel, 2015, Scarrow, 1997) and scholarship on gender in the EP context (for example, Kantola, 2010).

This study will seek to contribute to the first strand of literature by providing a granular description of the experiences and characteristics of German women in the EP and of German women in the various leadership positions. A comparison of these two groups will provide evidence of the factors that are effectively necessary for each of these career steps. The study will further our knowledge on the second strand of literature – gender in the EP – by adding a career perspective. While there is some research on the gendered effect of specific institutions, such as quotas (for example, Aldrich and Daniel, 2019, Euchner and Frech, 2022), little is known about how gendered entire career paths might be or how the various career stages might affect each other (for gendered exit and post-EP careers, see Frech, 2024). This study will therefore analyse how the pre-parliamentary education and political experience varies between men and women in the EP and its leadership, always using the German women MEPs dataset as a case study. Furthermore, this paper will seek to provide an innovative overview of individual contextual career factors - the marital status and parenthood – that have been overlooked so far.

On the Political Careers of MEPs

The first strand of research deals with the careers of MEPs. This research remains relatively scarce. The seminal work by Susan Scarrow (1997) provides an overview of the previous experiences of British, German, Italian, and French MEPs between 1979 and 1989. Norris (1999) expanded the analysed time span and range of MEPs. In recent years, the field has shown renewed interest in European careers, testing the predictions and career types of Scarrow (Hausner, 2017, Marzi and Verzichelli, 2023, Salvati, 2016). Moreover, recent studies have proposed new career typologies for the EP (Salvati, 2016) and tracked the types of career paths of MEPs over time, confirming the development of a ‘European Class’ (Dodeigne et al., 2024).

Previous research on the organization of the EP connects to the classical EP career research by analysing the distribution of offices. This research has for example analysed the assignment of MEPs to committees (see Bowler and Farrell, 1995,

Yordanova, 2009) and their representativeness (for example, McElroy, 2006). It is known that gender may predict committee assignment, with the direction of the effect depending upon the committee (Bowler and Farrell, 1995). Gender scholars criticize the EP for lacking gender equality also among the leadership of the committees, bodies that are very powerful players in the policy making process (Kantola 2010, p. 66).

Kantola and Miller (2022) have studied the political group leadership positions in the EP, including the leadership of the political groups, national delegation leaders, and groups' candidates for committee chairs and group coordinators. They found that women are underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly among national party delegation leaders, not only compared to the general population, but even compared to the share of women in the EP. They point out that the selection and execution of party group leadership is dominated by gendered norms and practices, although the degree of genderedness varies widely between political groups. While the left (GUE/NGL) and green (Greens/EFA) political groups are 'systematically most gender equal' (Kantola and Miller 2022, p. 166), the liberal (ALDE/Renew) and social democratic (S&D) party groups tend to negotiate gender equality and leaderships ('a commitment to gender equality is not always evident and gaps remain' – *ibid.*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conservative, right and anti-EU party groups are the most gender un-equal (Kantola and Miller 2022).

On the basis of the foregoing, two expectations may be posited:

***Expectation one:** Woman MEPs will be underrepresented in leadership positions compared to the proportion of women MEPs in the sample;*

***Expectation two:** Woman MEPs in leadership positions will tend to be better represented on the centre-left and, conversely, less well represented on the centre-right.*

Gender as an Important Meta-factor in and for Political Careers

As Borchert (2011) argued, when explaining political careers, distinctions need to be made between various institutional factors on the one hand and different individual factors on the other. Individual factors determining political careers can be either of a personal nature (for example, personal motivation/ambition or capability)⁵ or belong

⁵ On the basis of CVs, personal characteristics like the strength of intrinsic motivation, charisma or capability of MEPs cannot directly, or can only indirectly, be measured. However, since the study focuses on a group of politicians who all achieved success in electoral politics, similar levels of motivation and ambition can be assumed.

to the individual context (for example, personal relationships and family, children). Of the many individual factors that drive political careers, gender is probably the most consequential, both directly (via preferential treatment by gender, for example) and indirectly (through political socialization, for example – see Fox and Lawless, 2014). Given that gender is not only a very influential but even a meta-factor, being related to personal career factors as well as individual and institutional context, it is not surprising that a new research field has emerged on the topic, also in the EU context (for example, Aldrich and Daniel, 2019, Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger, 2022, Kantola, 2010). This study seeks to contribute to that research, investigating the factors affecting career trajectories of women differently than of men. It will focus on two individual contextual career factors that are inherently gendered and could therefore explain gender differences in political careers: namely, marital status, and parenthood.

Although gender and politics scholars already started studying the representation of women in parliaments decades ago (for example, Celis and Lovenduski, 2018, Mansbridge, 1999, Piscopo, 2011), only recently has research begun to focus more specifically on gender in the European Union (EU) and in the EP (for example, Ahrens and Agustin, 2019, Kantola, 2010, Kantola and Agustin, 2019). Several studies have considered the election into, and representation of, women in the EP, focusing on the impact of electoral systems, parties and individual experience (for example, Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger, 2022, Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2014, Lühiste and Kenny, 2016). Beyond the relatively balanced descriptive representation of women in the EP overall, scholars have also started to investigate gendered leadership in the EP (for example, Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger, 2022).

Individual contextual factors, such as marital status and children, are a link missing for a more complete understanding of what might or might not affect political careers. Indeed, gender and politics research has turned its focus only recently towards parents in parliaments (for example, Campbell and Childs, 2014, Thomas and Bittner, 2017) and how motherhood affects politics and policies (for example, Bryant and Hellwege, 2019). However, virtually nothing is known about parents in the EP (although see Frech and Kopsch, 2024). This study will seek to provide a first overview of the marital status and number of parents and average number of children for its dataset and will consider what conclusions can be drawn from such information in relation to career trajectories.

Having children affects the careers of parents, but particularly the careers of mothers. Research has shown that college-educated women with children attain significantly fewer degrees and reach a lower career status than women without children (Hoffnung,

2004). Furthermore, we know that the ‘double burden’ that mothers face, because caregiving responsibilities are typically shared unequally between mothers and fathers, also affects parliamentarians (Franceschet et al. 2016, Frech et. al. 2024). The double burden of taking care of children and a mandate has been shown to lead women to enter politics later in life (after the children have grown up) and causes women parliamentarians to have fewer children than their male colleagues (Campbell and Childs, 2014, Franceschet et al., 2016). Scholars refer to this effect as the ‘motherhood penalty’ (Franceschet et al., 2016; Murray, 2010). Mothers, ‘fitting into a male-dominated parliamentary culture ... face additional problems on top of those faced by women generally in the political workplace’ (McKay, 2011, p. 714).

Does the motherhood penalty exist for MEPs? As mentioned above, little is known about MEPs and parenthood in the European Parliament⁶, not even who has children or how many. This study seeks to shed some first light on the topic. It could be expected, given previous research in the national context (Campbell and Childs, 2014 for the UK; Hudde and Friedrich, 2019 for Germany; or Joshi and Goehring, 2021 for a comparative study), that the motherhood penalty exists among German MEPs. Women politicians in the EP who are mothers face a particularly heavy double burden because the distance between their constituencies (and family) and Brussels or Strasbourg is potentially large (Frech and Kopsch, 2024, Frech, 2024b). For all these reasons, this study expects that, because women MEPs have to balance family duties and travel with their political careers, they will tend to enter the European Parliament later, and have fewer or no children. Also, because leadership positions are particularly time consuming, this study expects to find that an additional motherhood penalty is being paid by women who occupy leadership positions.

Expectation three: Woman MEPs will tend to enter to European Parliament later than their male counterparts.

Expectation four: Women MEPs will on average have fewer children than their male colleagues and are more likely to have no children.

Qualification – Education, Occupation and Political Experience

Several studies have analysed the qualifications of parliamentarians and have associated these with questions of gender representation and gender quotas (Catalano Weeks and Baldez, 2015, Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2020). In these studies, the qualification of candidates or parliamentarians for a political mandate is classically

⁶ Although see Frech and Kopsch, 2024

measured using three pre-parliamentary career variables: education, first or formative occupation, and previous political experience (for example, Catalano Weeks and Baldez; 2015). Continuing the trajectory of previous research, this study will investigate whether an analysis of the same three measures—education, occupation, and political experience—can offer insights into potential differences in qualifications between German men and women politicians in the European Parliament. It will further analyse whether women possess, and therefore by inference need, more qualifications to obtain leadership positions in the European Parliament.

Gaxie and Godmer (2007) have shown that the proportion of legislators with a higher education and university degree as a function of total membership has increased in most European national parliaments since the 1920s. Studies have also found that women members of many parliaments tend to be as well qualified and educated as men members (for example, O'Brien, 2012). MEPs are, just like other, national, parliamentarians, an elite in terms of education and social status. This article posits that, as higher education and academic titles signal (or are perceived to signal) competence, political parties tend to select their candidates (and potentially their leaders) based on this aspect of qualification. Furthermore, because women need to make up for the 'male homosocial capital' (see Bjarnegard, 2013) that they are perceived to lack, this study would expect to find that women MEPs should therefore be at least as well educated as their male colleagues.

Expectation five: Women MEPs will tend to be at least as well educated as their male counterparts and probably more so.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that, relative to men, women tend to be interested in different subjects and therefore choose different occupations (for example, Charles and Grusky; 2004, Jarman et al., 2012). This occupational gender segregation is found in all societies, although to a varying degree (Jarman et al., 2012). Such gender segregation also applies to women in politics and affects the political careers of women politicians and the political leadership roles of women (for example, Tsuji, 2017). Further, women parliamentarians have a higher tendency to choose social foundational occupations (the occupations that they probably chose before entering politics) and are therefore more likely to specialize in social policy areas (Karam and Lovenduski, 2005). Based on these findings of occupational gender segregation as a generalised phenomenon, it can be expected that German women MEPs will have different, more social, formative occupations than men MEPs.

Expectation six: Women MEPS will probably previously have had different, more social, occupations compared to their male counterparts.

Previous studies on candidate selection for political offices and gender have shown that men have a clear advantage over women (for example, Bjarnegard, 2013, Verge and Astudillo, 2019). This advantage can at least in part be explained by a psychological theory that has been frequently used to explain gender bias in company board recruitment (for example, Branson, 2006, Rudman and Goodwin, 2004); the in-group bias theory argues that people have the tendency to favour, and hence also to recruit, candidates similar to themselves. This bias holds particularly with respect to gender and has also been shown to exist within political parties (for example, Crowder-Meyer, 2013, Niven, 1998, Rudman and Goodwin, 2004). Connected to this in-group bias, a study has shown that women have weaker information networks (Lyness and Thompson, 2000). Hence, on the basis of this research it would appear that men are more likely to be selected for political positions or good electoral list positions because of their gender. Researchers like Murray (2014) or Verge and Astudillo (2019) have argued and shown that, to make up for this disadvantage in selection, ‘women have to be exceptional’ (Murray, 2014; p. 530) in terms of their qualifications and political experiences. Just like in many other countries worldwide, German party leadership – local, regional and national – is male dominated. According to Wauters and Pilet (2015) German Parties had 1965-2012 only had about 5.7 percent female party leaders.

Based on these findings it can be expected that German women MEPs, and particularly women with leadership positions, would be more likely to have had previous political experience (on the national, regional or local level) than their male colleagues.

Expectation seven: Women MEPs, and particularly women MEPs in leadership positions, are more likely to have had previous political experience (on the national, regional, or local level) than their male counterparts.

The Dataset

As in previous research projects researching political careers (Bailer et al., 2020; Ohmura and Bailer, 2018), and based on Herzog’s theory of political careers (1970, 1975), this study is based on a three-phase conceptualisation of the political careers of European Parliamentarians; Pre-EP, EP, and Post-EP. The Pre-EP phase determines the political experiences and capital of a parliamentarian. The EP phase involves potential offices and the political behaviour of parliamentarians within the EP. The Post-EP phase includes post-parliamentary occupations and the final career goals of

MEPs (see Frech, 2024). This study will concentrate only on the Pre-EP experiences of women MEPs and in leadership positions within the EP (the EP phase, in other words).

Thus, this study analyses the Pre-EP and EP careers of 214 unique German parliamentarians – 77 women and 137 men – who were official members of the European Parliament between 1999 and 2019. The detailed dataset captures biographical details and political experience, starting from school education onwards, and including behaviour and career in the EP. Information about the detailed career data was drawn variously from CVs published by the politicians themselves and from public sources such as newspaper articles or Wikipedia pages of politicians. Part of the data – information on some of the leadership positions – was collected by the Evolv'EP project (Dodeigne et al., 2024), and the Evolv'EP dataset was used to cross validate the data amassed in this study.

A number of limitations and weaknesses in the composition of the dataset should be flagged up. First, clearly, gender is one of the main variables in this study. The approach used in this study is binary only. The gender (whether an MEP is a woman or not) was coded based on the used first name and depending on how the person was commonly referred to. Such an approach is clearly less than satisfactory in terms of achieving a fuller picture of identities but, given the reliance on secondary sources, had to suffice for the purposes of this study.

Collecting private, contextual information about the family status or children of parliamentarians was problematic for many reasons. First, clearly, the disclosure of such information is voluntary and might quite simply be withheld on the grounds that it is private. Hence, it can be assumed that some MEPs noted in this study as being without children might actually have (had) children, but this information was not recorded. Second, when analysing the effects of family, the age of the children matters. However, such information, which would have allowed for a richer analysis, is very rarely available, and certainly not comprehensively so. Finally, information (for example, on marital status) found in a current CV might not necessarily have been the case during past legislative periods. Because such entries could not necessarily be cross-checked against previous CVs, potential distortions in the data cannot be ruled out. Similarly, information about the marital status of a person denoted whether a person was ever married (that is, irrespective of a possible divorce later).⁷

⁷ Coding differently would have required knowing the exact dates of marriage and divorce, information that was not available.

Besides membership of the EP itself, four types of leadership positions in the EP were taken into account: *Committee chairs*, which included all chairs of standing committees⁸; *EP Leadership*, which captured whether the respective MEP was ever a Vice President or President of the EP; *EPG Leadership*, which indicated whether an MEP ever chaired one of the party groups in the EP; and, finally, *Group Coordinators*, who are chosen by each political group to represent and lead their group in each committee.

The study took into account *local* political experience as mayor⁹, as *regional* politician (members of the sixteen German regional (Länder) parliaments and of their executives), and as *national* parliamentarian (members of the Bundestag, other national parliaments and of the first freely elected GDR parliament). *Political Experience* denoted whether an MEP had any of these experiences prior to their first entry into the European Parliament. Several further personal variables of interest were collected and coded. The *Age* at entry captured the age at the first entry into the EP. *Academic titles* included PhDs and professorships¹⁰. To capture *education* or which *school* a person went to the study tested for whether an MEP finished the highest German school, thus qualifying to study at a University (High school, Gymnasium) or not – the *Abitur*.¹¹ The variable ‘*formative occupation*’ denotes the field of the first occupation after school in which a parliamentarian was trained, or the field of the subject the person studied¹². The International Labour Organisation’s International Standard Classification of Occupation coding was used to categorize the occupations into fields.¹³

Testing the expectations

Despite the limitations and partial weaknesses discussed above, the data generated by this study represents a substantive set of information that will now be used to test the seven expectations generated by the literature review.

⁸ I do not include chairs of special and sub committees because of limited data availability.

⁹ I do not include experience as deputy mayor nor members of the city council because in most German cities these are not elected offices.

¹⁰ I include Junior Professorships (assistant professorships)

¹¹ ‘Fachabitur’ (vocational diplomas) were also included.

¹² In case of multiple subjects, the main or first subject was coded.

¹³ See <https://isco.ilo.org/en/>

Expectation One: Woman MEPs will be underrepresented in leadership positions compared to the proportion of women MEPs in the sample.

Although, as previously noted, at the leadership level, the EP might not be as gender inclusive and equal as it would hope or its reputation would suggest, the EP is nevertheless the most gender balanced among the EU institutions and known for its comparatively high shares of women parliamentarians in comparison to many national parliaments (see Kantola, 2010). Moreover, Germany has consistently returned a higher share of women to the EP than to the national parliament (Bundestag) (see Feldkamp, 2014). In the studied time span, 77 out of 214 MEPs (36 percent) were women. This compares with the German Bundestag, which had on average about 32,9 percent women over the same time span (1998-2017) (Feldkamp, 2014).

While this picture mirrors the situation in many other EU member states (Kantola and Miller, 2022), the analysis of German women with leadership positions brings a small surprise: the share of German women in leadership positions is even slightly higher than the share of German women in the EP; 38 percent of all German MEPs who ever had a leadership position were women.¹⁴ Thus, the study does not bear out the expectation. In the context of this paper, we can only speculate as to why we find more German women than expected. Let's keep in mind that there are relatively few leadership positions available to begin with. Furthermore, some positions (notably committee chairs that are the most frequent types of positions) have relatively complex selection rules in the EP where gender is a factor and larger national delegations like Germany have an advantage.

Expectation Two: Woman MEPs in leadership positions will tend to be better represented on the centre-left and, conversely, less well represented on the centre-right.

However, the probability of German women MEPs occupying a leadership position does indeed vary by type of position and political group (see Table 1), confirming findings of the previous studies for the entire EP studied above (Kantola and Miller 2022, Kopsch and Kantola 2024). The distribution of committee chairs and vice presidencies of the parliament among German MEPs ensures a predominantly balanced gender equality. Unsurprisingly, given Kopsch's findings reviewed above (2024), for positions that are chosen by the political groups, the representation of

¹⁴ Of the 19 German women MEPs who occupied leadership positions, only five (6.5%) occupied more than one type of position.

women depends upon the left-right position of the group. Left and Green groups ensure a balanced representation of (German) women in positions like political group leadership, while German women were much less well represented in leadership positions in the liberal and EPP groups. No German far right or Eurosceptic MEP occupied a leadership position in the 1999-2019 period. Thus, this expectation proved to be correct.

Table 1: German Women MEPs in European Parliament Leadership Positions, 1999-2019

European Political Group	Political Group Leaders	Political Group Coordinators	Committee Chairs	EP Leadership (Vice/President)
GUE/NGL (Left)	2 W: 1 (50%)	1 W: 1 (100%)	3 W: 1 (33%)	1 W: 1 (100%)
Greens/EFA (Greens)	2 W: 2 (100%)	1 W: 0 (0%)	3 W: 1 (33%)	0 W: 0 (0%)
S&D (Socialists)	2 W: 0 (0%)	2 W: 1 (50%)	8 W: 3 (37.5%)	6 W: 3 (50%)
ALDE/Renew (Liberals)	0 W: 0 (0%)	1 W: 0 (0%)	2 W: 0 (0%)	3 W: 1 (33.33%)
EPP (Chr. Democrats)	2 W: 0 (0%)	4 W: 3 (75%)	15 W: 5 (33%)	4 W: 1 (25%)
ECR+EFDD (Conservatives+ Eurosceptics)	0 F: 0 (0%)	0 F: 0 (0%)	0 F: 0 (0%)	0 F: 0 (0%)
Non Attached	0	0	0	0
Total	8 F: 3 (37.5%)	9 F: 5 (56%)	31 F:10 (32.3%)	14 F: 6 (42.9%)

Note: The table shows the total numbers of Leadership Positions occupied by German MEPs, and the number of such positions occupied by women (with percentages in parentheses).

Expectation Three: Women MEPs will tend to enter the European Parliament later than their male counterparts.

Despite what the literature might have led analysts to expect, there is no observable significant difference in entry age between the German men and women MEPs, whether for all MEPs in the sample or for the MEPs in leadership positions. Thus, this study's sample reveals no statistical evidence to confirm the proposition that women MEPs will tend to enter the European Parliament later than their male counterparts.

Does this mean, then, that there is no such 'motherhood penalty'? A possible answer lies in the supposition that, because of the disadvantage connected to motherhood, women tend to enter politics later. The assumption above has been that 'women MEPs will tend to enter *the European Parliament* later than their male counterparts' (author's emphasis). But could it be that the motherhood penalty (if there is one) is being paid upstream of entry into the European Parliament?

In effect, it seems that the motherhood penalty – if it exists – pertains to a late entry into elective politics, whereas in general the EP is not usually the entry point into elective politics. Indeed, this study has found that most MEPs in the sample (77.6 percent) had occupied a local, regional or national party office or mandate before becoming MEPs. Further study would be required to determine whether women enter politics later than their male counterparts.¹⁵

Expectation four: Women MEPs will on average have fewer children than their male colleagues and are more likely to have no children.

Some 92.2 percent of women MEPs in the sample were mothers and some 96.5 percent of male MEPs were fathers. About 60 percent of all MEPs in the sample had at least one child. As was posited in expectation four, German women MEPs indeed had significantly less children than their male colleagues: women MEPs in the sample had on average 1.82 children; their male colleagues had on average 2.56. As can be seen in Figure 1, female MEPs more often had either no children or only one and rarely two, three or more.¹⁶ Moreover, the women MEPs in leadership positions had significantly fewer children on average than the males; women leaders had 1.5 children on average while the men had 2.35. In other words, the fourth expectation is borne out by the findings in the study; woman MEPs tend to have fewer children than their male

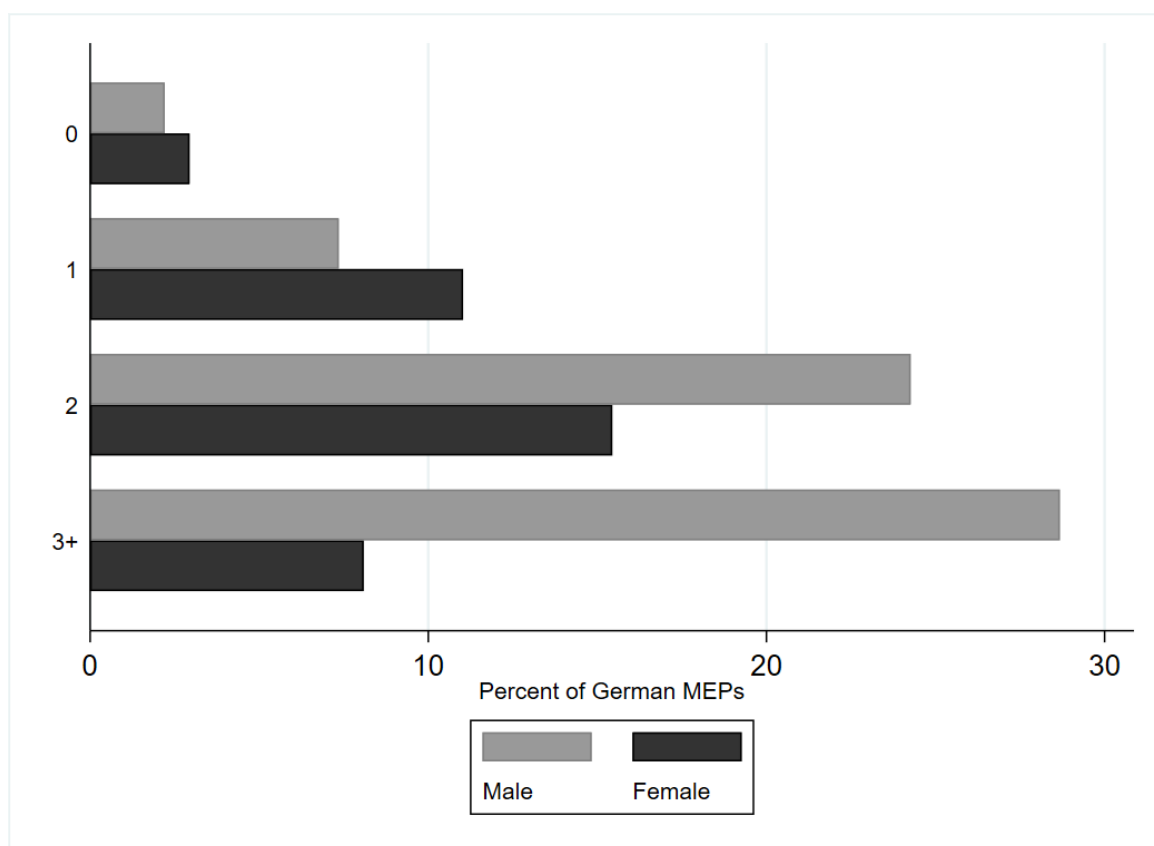
¹⁵ However, on the basis of the findings in this particular study, that would imply that such women politicians advance more rapidly to entry into the European Parliament.

¹⁶ The exact numbers of children need to be interpreted with caution because it is likely that MEPs without children are coded missing because no information can be found. Furthermore, there could be a gender bias in the disclosure of such information by the MEP.

counterparts, and the contrast is greater in relation to those MEPs occupying leadership positions. Here, then, is clear evidence that a motherhood penalty is being paid.¹⁷

The question whether and how hard it is for MEPs to balance work in the European Parliament and family life at home can be assumed to depend to some extent on the partnership and the support network of the parliamentarian¹⁸. Hence, the civil status could be seen as related to motherhood penalty. 90.2 percent of the women MEPs in this study's dataset had been married at least once (or were still married), while this was true for 97.8 percent of the male parliamentarians. The gap between the share of married women and men widens when focusing on German MEPs in leadership positions.

Figure 1: Number of Children of German MEPs



¹⁷ There are always exceptions. For example, Ursula von der Leyen has eight children and Angela Merkel has none. But the basic phenomenon seems clear and the reasons for it are intuitive.

¹⁸ While the strength of an MEP's support network cannot be measured, marital status is a first indicator.

Expectation Five: Women MEPS will tend to be at least as well educated as their male counterparts and probably more so.

A very high share (92.2 percent) of the German MEPs in the sample had a high school diploma (*Abitur*). However, the study shows significant differences between men and women; among the women MEPs there were some ten percent less parliamentarians with an *Abitur* than among the men (85.5 percent of women and 95.7 percent of men, respectively). Interestingly, this difference between men and women vanished for MEPs who occupied leadership positions; every German woman MEP who occupied a leadership position in the European Parliament had their *Abitur*.

The literature suggests that academic titles (doctorates or professorships or lectureships) serve as a signal for competence to voters and distinguish politicians from their peers (for example, Manow and Flemming, 2011). That roughly every third German MEP in the sample had an academic title speaks for a high level of education among (German) parliamentarians. However, contrary to expectations, significantly fewer women MEPs (19.5 percent) had an academic title than their male colleagues (31.4 percent). This difference, although to a lesser scale, existed also between women and men who occupied leadership positions.

The literature analysed above suggested that women had to overcome an inherent disadvantage in selection processes by being exceptional in terms of their qualifications (and political experience). The results of this study show that, on the contrary, if anything it was the male MEPs who tended to be better qualified. The reason for this surprising finding is unclear, but one could argue that, maybe, the gender quotas of German parties had the negative effect on 'candidate quality' that opponents argue it has; (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008).

Expectation Six: Women MEPs will probably previously have had different, more social, occupations compared to their male counterparts.

Is there such an occupational gender segregation among German MEPs? Table 2 provides an overview of the fields in which German MEPs obtained their first, formative occupation. The results do indeed indicate the expected gender segregation: the table shows a higher share of women MEPs in the fields of Education, Arts and Humanities, and the Social Sciences. Their male colleagues are more likely to have a formative occupation in Business, Administration & Law as well as engineering. There is some overlap, though; whereas 39 male MEPs had a first formative occupation in Business, Administration & Law, 34 had a first occupation in the Social Sciences and Journalism. Allowing for the smaller numbers

of MEPs in leadership positions and the many fields of education, the statistics reveal a similar pattern. Thus, the expectation elaborated above, that women MEPs will previously have had different, more social occupations compared to their male counterparts is, with a few nuances, largely borne out.

Table 2: Field of Formative Occupation of German MEPs by Gender

Field	All Women	Leaders Women	All Male	Leaders Male	All Total	Leaders Total
Education	9 (12%)	3 (15.79%)	13 (9.85%)	3 (10.34%)	22 (10.63%)	6 (12.50%)
Arts & Humanities	11 (14.67%)	6 (31.58%)	8 (6.06%)	2 (6.9%)	19 (9.18%)	8 (16.69%)
Social Sciences & Journalism	25 (33.33%)	5 (26.32%)	34 (25.76%)	8 (27.59%)	59 (28.50%)	13 (27.08%)
Business, Admin & Law	15 (20%)	3 (15.79%)	39 (29.55%)	9 (31.03%)	54 (26.09%)	12 (25.0%)
Natural Sciences	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	6 (4.55%)	1 (3.43%)	9 (4.35%)	1 (2.02%)
Information & Communication	1 (1.33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.48%)	0 (0%)
Engineering	4 (5.33%)	1 (5.26%)	21 (15.91%)	4 (13.79%)	25 (12.08%)	5 (10.42%)
Agriculture & Fisheries	4 (5.33%)	1 (5.26%)	8 (6.06%)	0 (0%)	12 (5.8%)	1 (2.08%)
Health	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3 (2.27%)	2 (6.9%)	6 (2.9%)	2 (6.9%)
Total	75 (100%)	19 (100%)	132 (100%)	29 (100%)	207 (100%)	48 (100%)

Note: Total Numbers including all MEPs (bold) or MEPs in Leadership Positions, percentages in parentheses

Expectation Seven: Women MEPs, and particularly women MEPs in leadership positions, are more likely to have had previous political experience (on the national, regional, or local level) than their male counterparts.

Prior political experience is an important qualification for a parliamentarian. More than a third of the German MEPs (35.5 percent) in the sample had a previous mandate in the national parliament (15.4 percent), or a regional parliament (22 percent) or had

been elected mayor at the local level (3.4 percent) prior to joining the European Parliament. The literature review above led this study to posit the expectation that women MEPs would be more likely to have previous political experience. However, the results show that there are no significant differences between men and women.

Analysing which national political experience German MEPs with leadership positions bring to the EP, we observe a slight increase in the importance of previous political experience (42 percent). Women with leadership positions are more likely to have pre-EP political experience (52.6 percent) than male leaders (35.5). This difference exists for national and regional mandates but is (due to the small number) not statistically significant. Nevertheless, these findings can perhaps be interpreted as first evidence of the importance of political experience for women's selection into leadership positions (see Verge and Astudillo, 2019).

Conclusions

Despite its image as an institution that favours gender inclusivity, the EP grapples with a persistent underrepresentation of women in key leadership positions.

This study has highlighted the dearth of knowledge surrounding the career paths of women occupying powerful positions within the EP. The few recent studies have underscored the role of political parties (e.g. Luhiste 2015) and (s)electoral institutions (e.g. Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger 2015) in shaping women's careers in the EP. However, there remains a gap in understanding the individual career prerequisites and the influence of individual contexts of women MEPs, such as their previous political experience and familial responsibilities.

This study has taken a first tentative, modest step to bridge this gap, by looking at the careers of German MEPs, particularly women, and comparing them with their male counterparts. Utilizing newly collected data covering two decades (1999-2019), including biographical and personal information, it has examined the political careers of women MEPs in relation to those with leadership experience, and has sought to uncover factors correlating with their trajectory within the EP. More specifically, it draws on gender theory to confirm the existence of a 'motherhood penalty' and to assess occupational gender segregation as well as a gender difference in (pre-EP) qualification among MEPs.

The EP's membership demonstrates comparatively high gender equality, notably in Germany where women constitute 36% of MEPs, surpassing the 32.9% average in the

Bundestag from 1999-2019. Surprising is the slight surpassing of overall representation in leadership positions, with 38% of German MEPs in leadership roles being women. Yet, nuanced variations in women's chances for leadership positions emerge, influenced by position types and political affiliations.

The results of this study indicate the presence of a notable "motherhood penalty" among German MEPs, particularly in leadership roles. This is evidenced by the fact that only two-thirds of female leaders are mothers, in contrast to 92.2% of female MEPs overall. Furthermore, while women MEPs, on average, have fewer children than their male counterparts and are more likely to remain childless, they do not enter the EP at a later age as would be expected. The second, negative finding may be explained by the fact that the EP is typically not the entry point into politics.

Gender differences in educational backgrounds are evident among German MEPs, reflecting occupational gender segregation in both education and profession, aligning with broader societal patterns. Furthermore, the analysis emphasizes the crucial role of political experience for German MEPs, with a slightly higher prevalence of pre-EP political experience observed among those in leadership positions, notably pronounced (but statistically insignificant) among women leaders, highlighting its potential importance in their selection.

This article has sought to provide a first, descriptive analysis of gender differences in individual career factors – children and pre-EP education and occupation – for German MEPs and leaders in the EP. The analysis takes care not to make any causal claims. The selection of MEPs and political leadership positions (see Kopsch, 2024) is complicated, varies by leadership position, and is influenced by many variables. As explained, particularly personal individual information, such as the age of children, is not available. However, precisely the exact age of children and other personal and contextual information, for example the support network, would be necessary to determine whether being a mother reduces the chances of getting elected into the EP or being selected into a leadership position. Hence, for reasons of missing information and the relatively small sample of MEPs analysed, this study has limited itself to a descriptive analysis and leaves further causal analyses and in-depth analyses of the genderedness of leadership in the EP to future research (see Kopsch, 2024). The relatively modest number of German MEPs, particularly in leadership roles, necessitates a circumspect interpretation of the results. Being the EU member state with the most MEPs, a relatively gender conservative and federal country, Germany is a good choice as a case study. However, German MEPs and their political careers might differ from those of other MEPs (see Daniel, 2015, chapter 7). The results of this study do therefore necessarily apply to all MEPs and are not generalizable to other,

national parliaments. Future research should extend the data and analyses to all MEPs and should study national parliamentarians comparatively.

While the European Parliament maintains a relatively high level of gender equality, this study has revealed nuanced disparities in leadership positions, motherhood penalties, educational backgrounds, and occupational segregation among German MEPs, providing insights into the complex dynamics of gender representation within the institution. The article's findings not only enrich understanding of political careers and gender dynamics in politics but also shed light on gender inequality, aiming to pave the way for enhancing representation in the EP

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