

Secondary Publication



Frech, Elena; Kopsch, Sophie

Beyond Rhetoric : The European Parliament as a Workplace for Parents and Current Reform Debates

Date of secondary publication: 19.06.2024

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-958778

Primary publication

Frech, Elena; Kopsch, Sophie (2024): „Beyond Rhetoric : The European Parliament as a Workplace for Parents and Current Reform Debates“. In: Politics and governance, Vol. 12, Nr. 8078, pp. 1-14, Lisbon: Cogitatio Press, doi: 10.17645/pag.8078.

Legal Notice

This work is protected by copyright and/or the indication of a licence. You are free to use this work in any way permitted by the copyright and/or the licence that applies to your usage. For other uses, you must obtain permission from the rights-holders.

This document is made available under a Creative Commons license.



The license information is available online:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

Beyond Rhetoric: The European Parliament as a Workplace for Parents and Current Reform Debates

Elena Frech ¹  and Sophie Kopsch ² 

¹ Institute for Political Science, Universität Bamberg, Germany

² Département des Sciences Politiques, Sociales et de la Communication, Université de Namur, Belgium

Correspondence: Elena Frech (Elena.Frech@Uni-Bamberg.de)

Submitted: 18 January 2024 **Accepted:** 22 April 2024 **Published:** 19 June 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments” edited by Petra Ahrens (Tampere University) and Sonia Palmieri (Australian National University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i382>

Abstract

Doing justice to their families and the political mandate is especially difficult for MEPs. Parents struggle to balance family obligations and work, particularly when the children are young. They undertake extensive journeys between their home constituencies and Brussels or Strasbourg. This taxing routine is further compounded by prolonged working hours, often devoid of leisurely weekends. In combination with the absence of a comprehensive parental leave policy, these challenges disproportionately affect parents of young children, particularly mothers, influencing the diversity and representation within the European Parliament. This study critically examines the existing conditions that shape the working environment of MEPs who are parents. It explores recent endeavors to reform these conditions and the underlying obstacles that hinder the progress of these reformative initiatives. Referring to relevant documents, this study first outlines formal regulations governing parental rights in the European Parliament. We then address informal rules and recent reform proposals using insight from MEP interviews. This examination investigates how parent MEPs assess working conditions and balance competing demands. Despite expectations, the European Parliament falls short of being as family-friendly as anticipated. Nevertheless, recent times have witnessed increased attention to the topic and various reform proposals. The obstacles posed by diverse national legacies and variant conceptions of MEP mandates and statuses for reform are highlighted.

Keywords

European Parliament; motherhood; parents; parliament as a workplace; reforms

1. Introduction: Parents and Mandates

The EU, particularly the EP, advocates gender equality and family protection. The Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU states that “everyone shall have the right to protection from dismissal for a reason connected with maternity and the right to paid maternity leave and to parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child” (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000, Art. 33(2)). However, MEPs still lack genuine maternity or parental leave (see Soler, 2023) despite the charter and an early EU maternity leave directive (92/85) from 1992 (European Union, 1992). As MEP Claudia Gamon stated in a speech in June 2023:

The European Parliament is the house of the people. It should be as diverse as the people of Europe are [...]. But the simple fact that there are no rules for parental leave, that there is no remote voting system, makes this house less diverse, and it infringes upon our rights as elected parliamentarians to represent our constituencies and to fulfill our mandate. It is undemocratic, and it is sexist. (EP, 2023)

This article presents a first exploration of the conditions faced by parent MEPs, probing the formal rules and informal challenges that shape the working environment for mothers and fathers (with young children) in the EP. In addition, it investigates how parent MEPs assess their working conditions and examines the ongoing debates regarding reform proposals to enhance the situation. This investigation underscores the gendered aspects of parental working conditions. It makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on parliamentary representation, parenthood, and gendered workplaces, particularly within the context of the EP. Furthermore, this research expands the scope of the literature on descriptive representation and the work–family balance of parents in parliaments by providing insight into the powerful EP. The study offers comprehensive knowledge of the rules governing parents in the EP, forming the foundation for an enhanced understanding of the descriptive and substantive representation of parents in future research.

The article also fills a gap in the existing research on parliaments as gendered workplaces by examining the working conditions of mothers in the EP. This study contributes valuable data to understanding the gendered nature of an extraordinary parliament: the EP. It adopts the “Gendered Workplace Approach” proposed by Erikson and Josefsson (2022) to determine whether the EP’s work organization, infrastructure, and interactions between MEPs disadvantage mothers. This analysis is particularly relevant because a gendered workplace for mothers has representational consequences (e.g., Muriaas & Stavenes, 2023), resulting in fewer women among senior parliamentarians in national parliaments. “I know at least one person who has said that she is quitting as a parliamentarian because she can no longer reconcile this with her family” (Interviewee 1).

The EP stands out from other parliaments due to its diverse representation of parliamentarians elected from different countries. Within the EU, parental leave policies vary considerably, encompassing differences in duration and eligibility for fathers across member states. Notably, national and European parliamentarians are elected, unlike traditional employees. Parental leave regulations and other employee rights may therefore not extend to parliamentarians, with the individual and nontransferable mandate taking precedence over fundamental rights. Simultaneously, the EP itself has the power to determine the working conditions of MEPs. This analysis describes the unique rules applying to MEPs and details how diverging views on the legal status of MEPs prevent reform.

This article employs a convergent mixed-method design to examine the formal and informal rules and preconditions comprehensively for parents working in the EP. It combines analyses of official documents, media reports, and semi-structured interviews with MEPs to triangulate different research methods and provide insight into the rules, reforms, and challenges facing parent MEPs.

The research findings reveal that the EP falls short of being a family-friendly workplace for parliamentarians. With no parental leave, the absence of remote voting for parents dealing with childcare responsibilities, and significant travel distances for many MEPs, the situation for parents in the EP is challenging. The level of challenge varies for mothers and fathers, contingent on their personal and family circumstances, including the occupation of their spouses. The discussion details how individual MEPs and groups, primarily the parents themselves, actively advocate for reform. They stress the importance of officially recognizing parental leave within the EP rules. Crucially, MEPs advocate for remote voting options during parental leave and propose the possibility of transferring votes to enable parental MEPs to balance their duties and childcare effectively. However, these proposals face strong opposition. Critics, including some MEPs, express concerns about the potential misuse of remote voting and question its effects on democratic principles. The debates highlight the delicate balance between the rights of parent parliamentarians and the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy, particularly the personal and nontransferable mandate of parliamentarians.

This research goes beyond describing the status quo and identifying challenges. Based on the analyses, academic and media discussions are actively shaped by three concrete proposed reforms. First, officially recognizing parental leave in EP rules would be a progressive step, acknowledging and supporting parent MEPs. Second, implementing remote voting during parental leave (with safeguards to prevent misuse) could help MEPs effectively balance responsibilities. Last, introducing a hybrid model of online and in-person meetings, around 10% to 15% online, could enhance the EP's family-friendliness by accommodating the needs of MEPs with family commitments.

2. Parents in Parliaments and the Gendered Workplace Approach

In recent years, a growing body of literature has focused on analyzing the role of mothers in politics (Bryant & Hellwege, 2019; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). However, studies on fathers or parents in general are less common (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Franceschet et al., 2024). Previous studies have highlighted the dual burden that women carry when trying to combine children and political careers because of an unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities between mothers and fathers. This results in women entering politics and parliament later than their male counterparts and having fewer children, often called the “motherhood penalty” (Franceschet et al., 2016; Murray, 2010). Moreover, women face a “traditional gender socialization” that impedes their political entry due to traditional family roles and responsibilities (Fox & Lawless, 2004). Women who choose a political career are typically either childless or have fewer children on average than their male colleagues and the general population (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Hudde & Friedrich, 2019; Joshi & Goehring, 2021).

Parliaments pose challenges for mothers and women due to an entrenched culture of masculinity because men have historically dominated parliaments (Lovenduski, 2005). However, the family-friendliness of parliaments has been overlooked (but see Franceschet & Xydias, 2024). This study contributes to the expanding literature

on gendered workplaces in parliaments (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022; Smrek, 2022; Verge, 2022) by examining the EP as a workplace for parents. The research focuses on elucidating the gendered nature of rules governing parents in this context.

A gender-equal parliament is one in which all politicians “are able to perform their tasks as legislators on equal terms, regardless of their gender, social background or identity” (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022). The EP stands out for its high female representation and commitment to gender equality. However, gendered patterns persist, hindering women’s political career progression (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger, 2022; Kantola & Miller, 2022). As this article reveals, the EP is a particularly interesting case as a parliamentary workplace because its members come from diverse cultural backgrounds and national regulations relating to parents. This results in the EP being more family-friendly than national parliaments for some members but more challenging for others.

Feminist institutionalism (the foundation of the gendered workplace approach and the more general theory) underscores gender differences by highlighting the bias in accessing resources and power (Mackay et al., 2010). This theory distinguishes between formal written rules that regulate parliamentary work (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022) and informal rules comprising uncodified norms and practices collectively shaping behavior (Chappell & Mackay, 2017).

Based on feminist institutionalism, the gendered workplace approach (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022) examines parliaments as workplaces with formal and informal rules. The approach distinguishes between the organization of work, tasks and assignments, leadership, infrastructure, and interaction between politicians. This article provides an exploratory analysis of the formal and informal rules affecting parents in the EP and assesses their gendered nature. However, while Erikson and Josefsson revealed formal and informal rules in all five mentioned organizational aspects, this research focuses on potential disadvantages in work organization and infrastructure, revealing the gendered nature of the EP and its implications for representation. Therefore, formal rules encompass (a) work organization (e.g., statutes, regulations on attendance, duration of absence, or voting eligibility during sessions) and (b) the infrastructure, including the physical location and facilities of the EP (e.g., childcare amenities and access permissions to MEP offices; Erikson & Josefsson, 2022).

The informal aspect includes circumstances that are not formally written down but might affect parents’ work in the EP, such as long working hours and meetings in the evening that can go into the night. Seen from a more general perspective, informal rules refer also to parenting norms (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022). Parents are confronted with different expectations of what parents should be and how they should behave. The EP, consisting of parliamentarians directly elected in 27 member states, combines different political groups, ideologies, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and political cultures. These divergent backgrounds also bring diverse attitudes regarding parenthood, such as who should raise the children or whether both parents should work. Although parenthood includes all parents, regardless of gender, the view of who is considered the primary carer may differ.

The EP is an extraordinary parliament because it comprises parliamentarians elected from different countries. To make that work, it underlies the principle of supranationalism, the member states’ willingness to shift their competencies to the EU level. Parental leave regulations, like other social policies, lie within the

power of the EU member states. Parental leave policies, such as the duration and eligibility for fathers, vary widely across the member states. Being a guardian of gender equality and social standards, the EU forces all member states to apply minimum standards to the protection of pregnant employees—14 weeks of maternity leave, two weeks of which must occur before birth (European Union, 1992, Art. 8) and secures paid maternal and parental leave (European Union, 2019, Art. 4, 5). However, applying these regulations to national parliamentarians depends on their status. Unlike traditional employees, M(E)Ps are elected, “which has implications for relationships at the workplace and labour law coverage” (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022, p. 21). Therefore, in some EU member states, such as Poland, legal parental leave regulations do not extend to parliamentarians and individual mandates and parliamentary office priorities take precedence over the individual rights of parents. The varying status of parliamentarians reflects the tension between the democratic principle of holding a personal mandate and the individual rights of MEPs.

In other EU countries, notably those with comprehensive parental leave regulations for national parliamentarians, these rules formally apply to their MEPs (e.g., Sweden). However, the EP holds the authority to define the rights and duties of MEPs in its members’ statutes, and these rights and obligations are uniform for all MEPs. Consequently, national rules and rights pertaining to MEPs from a particular country are not enacted or enforced. Establishing a standardized parental leave policy for all member states necessitates amending the statute of EP members. However, achieving consensus on this matter proves challenging due to the diverse traditions and cultural backgrounds across the EU, as demonstrated by several unsuccessful reform movements (see Section 5) organized by several groups of MEPs.

In summary, this article contributes to the scarce but growing literature on parents in parliament. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this study is the first on parenthood and the parliament as a gendered workplace in a supranational parliament (the EP). The aim is to identify challenges and actions to improve parents’ situations. Even though it is only a first analysis of who is responsible for and could improve parents’ situations in the EP, the study indicates the particular challenges and the importance of studying the EP as a workplace for parents. The MEPs are from diverse cultural backgrounds and legislations. Whether these national regulations apply to parliamentarians, such as MEPs, differs between countries. At the same time, the EP has authority over the working conditions of MEPs, which might make it more challenging to reach a consensus regarding reforms within the EP. This article is explorative due to knowing little about parental working conditions in parliaments or parents in the EP. Thus, there are no strong expectations regarding the working conditions of parents in the EP. However, based on characterizing the EP as a relatively women-friendly parliament with a comparably high share of female members and judging the EP by its own standards (see Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000), one could expect it to protect mothers and parents.

3. Methodology and Data

This article applies a convergent parallel mixed-method design to understand under which formal and informal rules and preconditions parents work in the EP. The analyses of official documents and media reports to determine the formal rules are combined with semi-structured interviews to learn about informal rules, ongoing discussions, reform proposals, and parents’ experiences. This research design allows the triangulation of research methods and provides a comprehensive analysis of the rules and reforms of the EP as a workplace. Additionally, this article presents recent reform initiatives, analyzes the ongoing debate, and discusses potential challenges these initiatives may encounter.

The first step is to gather data on formal rules for parents in the EP from various sources, including official documents such as the Statute for the Members of the European Parliament (2005) and the decisions implementing it (European Parliament, 2009), reports from European institutions (Bonewit, 2016), and media and newspapers articles (e.g., Rebhan, 2021; Weiss, 2021).

The second step is employing insights from the interviews with MEPs to examine the informal rules in the EP and gather perspectives on ongoing reform initiatives. During the interviews, MEPs were asked which reforms they propose to improve their situation in the EP. From December 2022 to October 2023, 11 semi-structured expert interviews with MEPs currently in office (each having children of various ages) were conducted. The interviews started with some questions about the number and age of the children of the MEP, followed by an open question about how the daily life of the MEP and the work–family balance is structured and perceived. The sequence and wording of interview questions varied, but the main interview questions were “Do you feel (your) children affect your everyday work as a European Parliamentarian, and if so, how?” and “What are the biggest challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance?” Subsequently, interviewees were usually asked which differences, if any, they perceive between mothers and fathers and what they can tell us about the current reform proposals to make the EP more family-friendly.

Finally, the MEPs’ opinions on the debated reform proposals and their ideas for improvement were solicited. The recruitment process for the interviews involved reaching out to MEPs through the chair of the EP Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality and direct contact, with subsequent contact determined by previous interview agreements. The aim was to achieve a representative sample regarding gender, age group, and EP party group (country) for MEPs. The final interview sample included four (36%) women, maintaining rough representativeness. However, due to self-selection bias, the age group with younger children (below 12) and younger MEPs (seven below 50) is overrepresented, whereas the age group above 60 (one MEP) is slightly underrepresented. Among the interviewed MEPs, one belonged to the Green party group, two were nonattached or from the far-right (ID) group, three were Social Democrats, and five were members of the Conservatives. The sample tends to over-represent large party groups, lacking representation from the left, the center-right (ECR), and liberal groups in the EP. Interviewees were from Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Portugal. The time MEPs, particularly parent MEPs, have for academic interviews is limited, and MEPs tend to give interviews only rarely and on topics that interest them. Thus, the composition of the interview sample could be influenced only to a limited degree, and self-selection bias cannot be excluded. Hence, the population of MEPs who agreed to interview only partially represents parent MEPs.

4. EP as a Workplace for Parents

The rights and duties of the MEPs have been defined by national legislation for many years. Because MEPs were predominantly treated the same as national parliamentarians, the compensation or pension of MEPs and the rules applying to mothers varied widely. Signed in 2001, the Treaty of Nice set out to align conditions for all MEPs by granting the EP the right to “lay down the regulations and general conditions governing the performance of the duties of its Members” (Treaty of Nice, 2001, Art. 4(6)). Soon after the Treaty of Nice entered into force (on January 2, 2003), the EP submitted the draft of a Members’ Statute to the other EU institutions. Following some revisions requested by the Council, the Statute for the Members of the European

Parliament was adopted in 2005 and entered into force in July 2009, 30 years after the EP was established (Statute for the Members of the European Parliament, 2005).

Implementing the Statute, the Bureau of the EP decided in the spring of 2008 that “Member(s) expecting a child shall be excused attendance at official meetings of Parliament” for three months before and six months after the birth of a child (European Parliament, 2009, Art. 31(4)). However, this regulation relates only to the MEPs giving birth (mothers). No official regulation exists regarding parental leave for fathers or parental leave beyond the mentioned six months for mothers. In addition, the adoption of a child is not included.

In 2021, Michael Bloss, an MEP from the German Green Party, was one of the first fathers who (publicly) announced that he would take part-time parental leave during his mandate. Within the framework of their free mandate, this leave is guaranteed and protected by EP rules. The MEPs are free to exercise their mandate as desired. The only constraint to this “voluntary parental leave” is posed by the pay cut if the MEP is absent from at least half of the plenary sessions (European Parliament, 2009, Art. 31(2)).

A more critical obstacle to parental leave as an MEP is that the mandate (and, most importantly, voting) can only be exercised in person. Hence, unlike in the Danish Volketing, there is no replacement for MEPs during parental leave. Moreover, if parents are required to be present in Strasbourg or Brussels, questions like whether mothers take their (breastfed) babies to parliament or who takes care of the children remain.

Taking a (small) child to plenary is theoretically allowed but not welcome in the eyes of many MEPs. The former Italian MEP Licia Ronzulli brought her daughter to plenary many times and received considerable media attention as a result (“It was maternal,” 2010). The EP building in Brussels also hosts a “family room.” Furthermore, there are daycare facilities and kindergartens in three locations: Strasbourg, Brussels, and Luxembourg. In Brussels, the EP offers daycare for children between three months and four years old and has reserved spots in several private daycares. In Strasbourg, the EP runs one daycare for children between three and 42 months and a second one at the European School Strasbourg. Finally, Luxembourg has two daycares for MEPs and EP personnel.

The coronavirus pandemic has increased home-office possibilities for parliamentarians. However, pandemic regulations have also made life for parents of small children and, particularly for breastfeeding mothers, more difficult, as current regulations forbid anyone who is not employed by or a member of the EP to enter the building, which applies to babies.

5. Increasing the Family-Friendliness of the EP: Opinions and Reform Initiatives

In the interviews with current MEPs, their perspectives on the family-friendliness of the EP as a workplace and their suggestions for improvement were explored, considering their gender, personal, and family situations. Responses, particularly from parents of young children, both fathers and mothers, paint a negative picture of the EP as a workplace. Some believe it is not accommodating to parliamentarians with younger children, expressing such sentiments as “it feels like the whole system is built for old men that want to get away from their wives” (Interviewee 3). The reason for this is the lack of a parent—or gender-sensitive parliament and of formal rules ensuring family-friendliness, such as parental leave. The interviewed parents also did not indicate any informal mechanisms, such as informal party substitution, which would help to accommodate parents in

the EP. This outcome is surprising given that the leadership of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, the Intergroup on Demographic Challenges, Family-Work Balance and Youth Transitions, and a large group of MEPs attach great importance to the issue.

While all interviewed MEPs acknowledged the challenges mothers faced, especially during the weeks after childbirth or while breastfeeding, opinions on the EP's overall family-friendliness and necessary reforms significantly diverged. Fathers, including those with young children, often find it comparatively easier to balance family and mandate, leading them to perceive reforms as less urgent. Based on their member state and partner's occupation, the interviews highlighted that parent MEPs either relocate their families to Brussels or Strasbourg or travel, leaving their partner and children behind. Many young parents, particularly mothers with families in more distant countries, identified the frequent travel and the necessity to be away every week as the most significant burden (Interviewee 3; see also Frech, 2024). While the 2020–2022 coronavirus pandemic was a devastating time for many worldwide, it revealed to parent MEPs of young children that it was possible to balance being present for their children and fulfilling their mandate. During the extraordinary circumstances, the EP transitioned to online or hybrid meetings, allowing remote voting and ensuring the EP's functionality. When the EP reverted to in-person meetings and voting after the pandemic, parent MEPs expressed a desire for the EP to retain the benefits of remote meetings (Interviewees 3, 5, and 11). "During the pandemic, it was very good because everything was digital, and that's also why I sort of took the opportunity to have a child during that period. Otherwise, I think I wouldn't have done it" (Interviewee 3).

Furthermore, the MEPs criticized the organization of work in the EP, arguing that the option for mothers to stay home for six months does not constitute genuine maternal leave. The absent MEP cannot be replaced in plenary voting and lacks remote voting, leading to pressure to attend despite being allowed to stay home. One MEP explained: "sometimes, we lose or win with one vote. So, the pressure is there to go" (Interviewee 5). Consequently, MEPs with young children and advocates of gender equality consistently demand the EP to retain remote voting for parents (Interviewees 1, 3, 7, and 9). An informal group of young parents from various countries and major political groups initiated lobbying efforts to retain remote voting rights after the pandemic. Despite discussions with the EP leadership and optimism fueled by the EP president, Roberta Metsola, being a young woman and mother of four children, their efforts were unsuccessful (Interviewee 1).

In the interviews and during discussions in the EP, opponents pointed to the democratic value of gathering and discussing physically:

Us representing European voters means that we gather in one place, that we really exchange views, that we debate, that we talk in the corridors. And I really think that helps us not to go into some kind of really parallel societies in terms of different Member States, but also in terms of different political views. (Interviewee 6)

In the interviews, similar arguments were raised against the proposal to transfer the vote of MEPs on parental leave to another MEP or the party delegation or fraction, pointing to the EP not being a "classical employer" (Interviewee 8) and the mandate being personal and nontransferable (Interviewee 9). The concept of a parliamentary mandate being personal and nontransferable is applied in several European countries. For instance, the constitutionally mandated personal exercise of the mandate is evident among the parliamentarians of the Czech Chamber of Deputies and members of the Polish Sejm are explicitly not

considered employees (Bonewit, 2016). Arguments have been made regarding the potential unconstitutionality of parental leave (with a replacement) in German parliaments (see Wahlmann, 2020). Conversely, certain (mostly Nordic) countries permit their national parliamentarians extensive parental leave and even allow replacements during their absence (Bonewit, 2016). These diverse legal interpretations in European member states and diverging parenting norms contribute to the ongoing debate in the EP and determine the informal rules and constraints parent MEPs face.

Among the more formal steps MEPs have recently undertaken to make the EP more parent-friendly are amendments to existing legislative proposals. For example, one amendment has been added to budgetary matters to include the possibility of parental leave in the budget, i.e., the multiannual financial framework (Interviewee 5).

In the summer of 2023, the media reported on three pregnant MEPs leading a campaign for “Parental leave in the European Parliament” (see Wax, 2023). A group of 13 MEPs joined the Dutch MEP Lara Wolters, the Austrian MEP Claudia Gamon, and the French MEP Le’la Chaibi and proposed reforms to make the EP more parent-friendly in their Motherhood Manifest (Wax, 2023). In June of 2023, the group submitted a petition for parental leave to EP President Roberta Metsola. The initiative advocated three changes. The first proposed change is the “official recognition of parental leave in the rules of procedure, so some sort of status or that makes it clear, we’re on parental leave” (Interviewee 9). This official recognition aims to prevent mothers who give birth during their mandate from having low attendance rates due to parental leave and from being unfairly portrayed as lazy or taking advantage. While the EP can modify its rules of procedure, the EP administration, citing the freedom of the mandate, did not perceive a compelling reason to do so. The second proposal, advocating remote voting for parents after childbirth, faced rejection from the EP leadership due to privacy and security concerns and fears of potential misuse by MEPs avoiding travel (Interviewee 9). The third proposal is even more contentious, suggesting the ability for parents to transfer their votes during maternity or parental leave to a colleague or delegation leader. The principle of a personal nontransferable mandate poses a significant hurdle, making introducing this change seem hopeless to parents and the initiators. A modification of electoral laws would be necessary to enable vote transfers or the replacement of MEPs during parental leave (Interviewee 9).

Beyond the debate on the personal mandate versus the (working) rights of parents and representational concerns, opponents of parental leave in the EP have raised several arguments. First, some (predominantly male) MEPs argue that they enjoy generous compensation and pensions and are (like most other politicians) envied and frowned upon by a growing part of society. Their image would be further harmed if they could stay home for extended periods during their mandate (Interviewee 8). Second, many MEPs would likely choose remote voting if allowed, potentially diminishing the EP’s power and democratic quality (Interviewee 9). Finally, opponents emphasized the power and privilege of MEPs, asserting that making sacrifices comes with the special responsibility of making decisions for millions of people (Interviewee 10).

The parent MEPs highlight several more minor changes that could enhance their situation. First, their families’ access to the EP infrastructure (buildings) is a notable concern. Private individuals, including family members, are typically restricted from entering MEP offices and buildings. The suggestion of having a “family day” without plenary work emerged as an idea, providing an opportunity for MEPs to show their children where they work (Interviewee 6).

Second, MEPs would like to coordinate traveling times better with school vacations and holidays. Many MEPs are part of a delegation traveling regularly to various parts of the world. The EP rules restrict their travels to so-called green weeks (constituency weeks), which often fall into school vacations around public holidays. Scheduling delegation travels during other weeks, possibly committee weeks, would be more accommodating for school-aged children (Interviewee 10).

The third proposal for improvement of the parents' situations is more contested than the first two. Some have argued that, instead of meeting once a month for three and a half days, one could reduce the number of sessions in Brussels or Strasbourg by meeting for five days. Agreement on this proposal depends on where MEPs have their families—in Belgium or far away in their home country. In addition, being away for more days in a row is a solution not everybody prefers (Interviewee 10).

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The EP is renowned as a women-friendly parliament and fighter for equal opportunities for women and the rights of parents. However, is it a good place for parents? The central question of this article revolves around the formal rules and informal working conditions governing parent MEPs, their self-evaluation of these conditions, and the ongoing debates surrounding reform proposals. The described working conditions of parents and potential reforms are gendered; thus, a substantial challenge for mothers might not affect fathers at all.

The descriptive, explorative analysis of the parental working conditions in the EP has illuminated the challenging landscape parent MEPs navigate, marked by extensive travel, prolonged working hours, and a conspicuous absence of (comprehensive) parental leave policies. Despite the EU's commitment to gender equality and family protection, the EP falls short of providing a genuinely family-friendly environment for its members and performs poorly regarding family-friendliness by the parents of young children.

This analysis affirms that the formal conditions for parents in the EP are far from ideal. The lack of a genuine parental leave poses a significant challenge, especially for mothers during pregnancy, post-birth, and the breastfeeding period. Although MEPs can be absent from plenary sessions and replaced in committees for a period after childbirth, the inability to designate a substitute during voting sessions and the prohibition on online voting creates substantial pressure on parent MEPs to forgo parental leave.

Furthermore, this analysis highlights how the mix of responsibilities between the EP and member states complicates reforms in the EP. The primary challenges for reforms of EP rules for parent MEPs are the varying parenting norms and concepts of the democratic mandate of European parliamentarians. Certain member states, and consequently MEPs, have argued that the parliamentary mandate is personal and non-transferable. This perspective makes it challenging to introduce a replacement for MEPs on parental leave. The daily and informal challenges of parent MEPs predominantly relate to traveling considerable distances between parliament and family. Those with young children find traveling between the constituency and parliament challenging, particularly when the distance between Brussels or Strasbourg and the family home is significant. In addition, as with most other informal challenges, mothers suffer more from being away from their children, which is likely due to social norms that expect mothers to be with their children and take a larger share of caretaking. Although only a small number of parents were interviewed,

fathers reported more often than mothers that their partner stays home with the children, leading to their work–family balance being perceived as less problematic. The MEPs’ interactions usually exclude children as a topic, leading to parents feeling alone and often not knowing whether their colleagues have children.

In response to the identified challenges, this study actively contributes to the ongoing discourse by suggesting three concrete reforms. First, official recognition of parental leave within EP rules would lend a more progressive touch and make parent MEPs feel acknowledged. Recognizing parental leave would alleviate concerns, such as negative attendance scores resulting from missed plenary sittings and reduce unnecessary requests from colleagues and journalists. Second, the recommendations extend to implementing remote voting options, specifically during parental leave, enabling MEPs to balance their responsibilities and family commitments effectively. This option would be exclusive to parents on parental leave to prevent misuse. The third proposed reform to create a more family-friendly EP involves introducing a hybrid model of online and in-person meetings. While acknowledging the importance of in-person interactions, a modest portion (10% to 15%) of online meetings scheduled on specific days or weeks (e.g., during school holidays or public holidays) would improve the balance between family and parliamentary duties.

This analysis of the formal and informal working conditions of parents in the EP revealed challenging circumstances despite the EP’s reputation of being gender-friendly. The EP is a particularly challenging case for implementing gender-friendly or parent-friendly reforms due to diverse national legacies and differing conceptions of MEP mandates, presenting formidable obstacles to reform initiatives. Thus, this article underscores the complexity of addressing these problems on a pan-European scale and highlights the uneven attention given to challenges faced by parents with political careers in Europe.

The exploration of parenthood in the EP offers avenues for future research to understand the specific experiences of fathers and mothers better, considering the diverse individual and familial circumstances that shape their parliamentary engagements. Furthermore, investigating the potential influence of proposed reforms on the functioning of the EP and the representation of diverse voices remains a crucial area for future inquiry. Additionally, comparative studies across parliamentary systems could provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of various reform models.

In conclusion, this study underscores the imperative for the EP to evolve into a more inclusive and accommodating workplace for parents. The proposed reforms and the dialogue initiated by this research aim to inform and inspire further discussion and hopefully contribute to reshaping the EP into a genuinely representative and supportive institution for all its members, regardless of parental status.

Acknowledgments

We thank Petra Ahrens and Sonia Palmieri for their feedback and the organization of this thematic issue. Furthermore, we are grateful for the helpful comments by Cecilia Josefsson and Josefina Erikson, the participants of the “Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments” authors workshop as well as the participants of the TRANSITIONS seminar at the University of Namur. We thank Florian Schreiner for research assistance.

Funding

Funded by the internal research funding program of the University of Bamberg and the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Bonewit, A. (2016). *Preparing a harmonized maternity leave for Members of the European Parliament—Legal analysis*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/556937/IPOL_IDA%282016%29556937_EN.pdf
- Bryant, L. A., & Marin Hellwege, J. (2019). Working mothers represent: How children affect the legislative agenda of women in congress. *American Politics Research*, 47(3), 447–470.
- Campbell, R., & Childs, S. (2014). Parents in parliament: “Where’s mum?.” *The Political Quarterly*, 85(4), 487–492.
- Chappell, L., & Mackay, F. (2017). “What’s in a name? Mapping the terrain of informal institutions and gender politics.” In G. Waylen (Ed.), *Gender and informal institutions* (pp. 23–44). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000, 2000/C 364/01.
- Dingler, S. C., & Fortin-Rittberger, J. (2022). Women’s leadership in the European Parliament: A long-term perspective. In H. Müller & I. Tömmel (Eds.), *Women and leadership in the European Union* (pp. 74–94). Oxford University Press.
- Erikson, J., & Josefsson, C. (2022). “The parliament as a gendered workplace: How to research legislators’ (un)equal opportunities to represent.” *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75(1), 20–38.
- European Parliament. (2009). Decision of the Bureau of 19 May and 9 July 2008 concerning implementing measures for the Statute for Members of the European Parliament. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 159. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009D0713\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009D0713(01))
- European Parliament. (2023). *Verbatim reports of proceedings—Monday, 12 June 2023. One-minute speeches on matters of political importance*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-06-12-ITM-022_EN.html
- European Union. (1992). Council Directive 92/85 /EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (tenth individual Directive within the meaning of Article 16(1) of Directive 89/ 391 /EEC). *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 348/1.
- European Union. (2019). Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 12 July 2019. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 188/79.
- Fox, R. L., & Lawless, J. (2004). Entering the arena? Gender and the decision to run for office. *American Journal of Political Science*, 48(2), 264–280.
- Franceschet, S., Och, M., & Xydias, C. (2024). Gender, family status, and parliamentary careers in the German Bundestag. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2024.2328552>
- Franceschet, S., Piscopo, J. M., & Thomas, G. (2016). Supermadres, maternal legacies and women’s political participation in contemporary Latin America. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 48(1), 1–32.
- Franceschet, S., & Xydias, C. (2024, March 25-28). *Parenthood and politics: Surveying state and national legislators in Germany* [Paper presentation]. ECPR Joint Sessions, Lüneburg, Germany.

- Frech, E. (2024, March 25-28). *Balancing politics and parenthood: Gendered implications in the parliamentary workplace of the European Parliament* [Paper presentation]. ECPR Joint Sessions, Lüneburg, Germany.
- Hudde, A., & Friedrich, C. (2019). Having power, having babies? Fertility patterns among German elite politicians. *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung*, 31(1), 27–39.
- It was maternal, not political, says Italian MEP who took her baby to work. (2010). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/24/licia-ronzulli-baby-parliament>
- Joshi, D. K., & Goehring, R. (2021). Mothers and fathers in Parliament: MP parental status and family gaps from a global perspective. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 74(2), 296–313.
- Kantola, J., & Miller, C. (2022). Gendered leadership in the European Parliament's political groups. In H. Müller & I. Tömmel (Eds.), *Women and leadership in the European Union* (pp. 150–172). Oxford University Press.
- Lovenduski, J. (2005). *Feminizing politics*. Polity Press.
- Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. (2010). “New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism?” *International Political Science Review*, 31(5), 573–88.
- Muriaas, R., & Stavenes, T. (2023). Gender and political seniority: Three measures. *Politics & Gender*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X23000533>
- Murray, R. (2010). Linear trajectories or vicious circles? The causes and consequences of gendered career paths in the national assembly. *Modern & Contemporary France*, 18(4), 445–459.
- Rebhan, C. (2021, May 22). Elternzeit ist als Abgeordneter nicht vorgesehen—warum dieser Grüne trotzdem in Teilzeit geht. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.de/politik/deutschland/elternzeit-ist-als-abgeordneter-nicht-vorgesehen-warum-dieser-gruene-trotzdem-in-teilzeit-geht>
- Smrek, M. (2022). When is access to political capital gendered? Lessons from the Czech parliament. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75(1), 76–93.
- Soler, P. (2023, May 10). *It's 2023 and still no parental leave for MEPs*. EUObserver. <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/157017>
- Statute for the Members of the European Parliament. (2005). Statute for the Members of the European Parliament. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:mep_status
- Thomas, M., & Bittner, A. (2017). *Mothers and others: The role of parenthood in politics*. UBC Press.
- Treaty of Nice. (2001). *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 80/1. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12001C/TXT>
- Verge, T. (2022). Too few, too little: Parliaments' response to sexism and sexual harassment. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75(1), 94–112.
- Wahlmann, K. (2020). *Mutterschutz und Elternzeit für Abgeordnete*. Dunker und Humblot.
- Wax, E. (2023, June 16). “Sexist and undemocratic”: Pregnant MEPs demand ability to vote on maternity leave. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/sexist-and-undemocratic-pregnant-meps-demand-maternity-leave-and-remote-voting>
- Weiss, R. (2021, May 30). Interview: EU-Abgeordneter Bloss über Elternzeit bei Männern. *JETZT*. <https://www.jetzt.de/politik/eu-abgeordneter-bloss-ueber-elternzeit-bei-maennern>

About the Authors



Elena Frech is an associated researcher at the University of Bamberg (Germany) and works as postdoctoral researcher in the EVOLV'EP–MEPs' Career & Behaviour Project at the Department of Political Science, Social Science and Communication at the University of Namur, Belgium. Before, she was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bamberg from 2021–2023. Her research interests include comparative political institutions, representation, European legislative politics, parliamentary behaviour and decision-making, as well as gender & politics. In particular, her expertise encompasses political parties, political careers, and the representation of parents and women in politics. Her work has been published in *International Organization*, *European Politics*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and other journals.



Sophie Kopsch is a doctoral researcher at the University of Namur (Belgium). Funded by the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS), she analyses, in her PhD, the political careers of women and their access to top positions in the European Parliament. Besides her specialization in the European Parliament, she has expertise on parliaments in general as well as on political careers, candidate selection processes, and electoral laws.