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# Gendering democracy: feminist parliamentary responses to opposition against gender equality

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## ABSTRACT

Gendering democracy in parliaments faces a wave of active opposition against gender equality by far-right parties and anti-gender movements in Europe. In this adverse context, advancing gender equality policies relies on discourses and practices that address this opposition. What are the feminist parliamentary strategies to respond to anti-gender far-right opposition? This article studies feminist responses articulated in the Catalan parliament, the most gender-sensitive regional parliament in Spain, from the entry in 2021 of the far-right party Vox through interviews with members of Catalonia's parliament and analysis of parliamentary debates. Whilst parliamentary groups and individuals respond through coalition-building, rule-making, knowledge production, and everyday pragmatic engagement with the far right, the Parliament as an institution appears less responsive. We identify new categories of responses, such as institutionalization of gender equality and protection and support. The gender-sensitive Catalan parliament shows how the disruptive impact of far-right anti-gender opposition on parliamentary democracy and equality goes beyond its small representation, by triggering polarization that jeopardizes parliamentary debates on gender equality and pushes them outside the parliament. Yet, the strength of the institutionalization of gender equality and alliances and the role of feminist civil society and critical actors equip the parliament to counter anti-gender opposition.

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## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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## Introduction

Gendering democracy faces new resistance in the current wave of opposition to gender equality led by anti-gender movements and far-right parties. The gendered rules of political institutions take on a new oppositional dimension that challenges established gender equality policies and actors within parliaments across Europe. What are the feminist parliamentary strategies to respond to anti-gender opposition? Who are the main actors in parliament that respond to the anti-gender opposition? Through semi-structured interviews with members of the regional parliament in Spain, Catalonia, and analysis of parliamentary debates and documents, we aim to understand the feminist institutional responses to anti-gender opposition articulated in parliament.

We argue that, by triggering polarization around gender, the far right, even with a small parliamentary presence, jeopardizes deliberation and debates on gender equality. This includes pushing pro-equality actors out of the parliamentary arena. Yet, the Catalan parliament shows that a strong

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feminist institutionalization of equality, through internal gender equality policies and structures, as well as a political coalition agreeing on a *cordon sanitaire*, equip parliaments to counter or prevent the anti-democratic effects of anti-gender opposition. Feminist parliamentary responses mobilize innovative formal and informal strategies of 'coalition-building' and 'rule-making' to isolate the far right and advance the equality agenda, as well as feminist 'knowledge' and 'everyday pragmatic engagement' strategies to mitigate the disruptive role of anti-gender actors on equality matters. Our study empirically engages with these response categories, identified by Kantola and Lombardo (2024), while adding to this conceptualization a preventive strategy exemplified by gender equality institutionalization and a subcategory of everyday pragmatic engagement: protection or support of political actors enduring attacks from anti-gender opposition. Whilst parliamentary groups and individuals are the main actors that respond to anti-gender opposition, the Parliament as an institution appears less responsive. Researching feminist institutional responses within parliaments in times of rising opposition against gender equality allows understanding the challenges and capacity of democratic institutions to counter opposition against established gender equality policies and democratic rights.

### Gendering democracy in oppositional contexts: feminist parliamentary responses

Democracy in the European Union (EU) is currently under threat (Gora & de Wilde, 2022). Not only is there a declined commitment to the EU rule of law in several member states; there is also a deterioration in the quality of deliberation, which, according to Gora and de Wilde (2022), is the essence of democratic backsliding. Far-right parties contribute to eroding the democratic debate and deliberation processes by questioning the legitimacy and right to existence of their political opponents. They do so by increasing political polarization and the use of hate speech in the media and institutions. This polarization is 'pernicious' for democracy, McCoy et al. (2018) argue, because in this antagonistic politics, a 'normal political adversary (...) is transformed into an enemy to be vanquished' (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19) and 'compromise, consensus, interaction, and tolerance' become 'increasingly costly and tenuous for individuals and political actors across the opposite sides of the polarisation' (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18). Consequently, even without a significant institutional presence in parliaments, far-right parties can undermine key elements of democracy, such as debate and deliberation.

Gender is central to this polarization. In the last two decades, an active opposition against gender equality and LGBTI rights has been articulated by so-called 'anti-gender' actors from movements and political parties (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). As Verloo (2018, p. 6) defines it, opposition is 'any activity in which a perspective of opposing feminist politics and gender equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policymaking at any stage'. Opposition against gender equality manifests through attacks and delegitimation of gender and LGBTI equality policies, discrediting feminist knowledge, attacking and defending feminist and LGBTI organizations, and employing hateful, misogynistic, LGBTIphobic, and racist speech. Anti-gender campaigning includes a variety of strategies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), from the national and transnational sharing of discourses to lobbying, demonstrations, petitions, transnational fundraising to campaigns against sexual, reproductive and LGBTI rights and to influence policymakers and courts, and use of (social) media for anti-gender purposes (Datta, 2021; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Far-right parties are key actors in this opposition against gender equality (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Scrinzi, 2023). In Spain, the far-right party Vox has provoked gender equality policy backsliding, even when not in government, as in Andalusia (Alonso & Espinosa, 2021). In parliamentary contexts, such as the European Parliament, far-right populists mix outright rejection of gender equality, also recurring to hateful speech, and discrediting feminist knowledge as 'gender ideology', with indirect opposition strategies that attack gender equality by using other targets, such as the EU's alleged interference with national gender and family norms, or racialized minorities and Muslim people's supposed threat to native

women's rights (Kantola & Lombardo, 2020). The nativist and xenophobic nature of far-right opposition against gender equality thus makes intersectionality of gender-race and sexuality a critical analytical approach to understanding the phenomenon (see Datta, 2021; Sältenberg et al., 2024; Scrinzi, 2023). The use of hateful speech and violence against women, LGBTI and racialized people in politics is detrimental not only to equality but to democracy. Indeed, violence against marginalized groups such as women in politics (Krook, 2020) and feminist and LGBTI activists (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2021) intimidates them, sending a message about their supposed inferiority, thus limiting their participation rights and expelling them from the public sphere.

Feminist 'critical actors' within and collaborating with institutions have a key role in challenging the gendered dynamics of exclusion and rejection of gender equality that exist in parliamentary contexts (Childs & Krook, 2009). Feminist governance structures have developed in various institutional contexts to influence and guide state governance by integrating gender and intersectional perspectives into policymaking and involving women and feminist groups in policy processes. Within parliamentary settings, they include a variety of committees, groups and other bodies that specialize in gender equality, feminist politics, LGBTI rights, sexual harassment, or antiracism (Sawer, 2023). Feminist critical actors have also worked towards the construction of 'gender-sensitive parliaments' (Childs & Palmieri, 2023), to address the formal and informal gendered rules that shape parliaments' daily work and impact on how women and men members of parliament (MPs) work. The concept of 'gender-sensitive parliament' refers to the need for parliamentary institutions to have structures, operations, methods and ways of working that respond to the needs and interests of both women and men (Palmieri, 2019, p. 177). International organizations such as the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), UN-Women, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) encourage parliaments to promote gender equality by identifying the barriers that limit women's presence and hinder progress towards equality and proposing solutions to make parliaments more gender-equal (Childs & Palmieri, 2023).

While there is literature on feminist institutional action to advance gender equality in parliaments (Erikson & Verge, 2022; Verge, 2020), research on feminist responses against anti-gender opposition is recently emerging. To date, it has focused on responses from social movements and civil society (Cullen, 2021; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2021). Our understanding of feminist institutional responses in this article draws on this emerging literature and applies the conceptualization of Kantola and Lombardo (2024) to the analysis of the Catalan Parliament. Kantola and Lombardo (2024, p. 5) define feminist institutional responses as 'the response to anti-gender politics that is articulated by politicians, staff, committees in a parliamentary context, or by a body that represents the whole institution'. Kantola and Lombardo (2024) propose the following analytical categories for capturing forms of feminist institutional responses to the new form of active resistance to gender equality: 'knowledge', 'coalition-building', 'rule-making' and 'everyday pragmatic engagement'. Since feminism is a political project that aims at ending all oppressions (Hooks, 1984), research on the feminist movement's mobilization to resist attacks on women's sexual and reproductive rights, racialized and LGBTQI\* people, and LGBTI rights has addressed the intersectionality of such feminist mobilizations (Liu et al., 2024; Zavella, 2020). Research on feminist institutional responses partially addresses the extent to which these are intersectional, finding some evidence of gender-race-sexuality-class intersections in the discursive responses in the European Parliament (Kantola & Lombardo, 2024).

The responses of 'knowledge' and 'coalition-building' emerge from the literature on feminist movements and refer, respectively, to the importance of discursive strategies for constructing their political project (Cullen, 2021) and to the forging of coalitions that bring actors together around common goals (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2021). Kantola and Lombardo (2024) employ the broader concept of 'knowledge' to mean not only discursive responses but all the activities of constructing and employing knowledge about gender equality, such as MPs providing data or commissioning expert reports about gender inequality, to counteract misinformation and delegitimation by anti-gender actors.

'Rule-making' and 'everyday pragmatic engagement' responses are identified both inductively from the empirical analysis of parliamentary dynamics and by drawing on feminist institutionalism theory about formal and informal gendered rules (Gains & Lowndes, 2022). 'Rule-making responses' are defined as 'the formal and informal rules and concerted institutional efforts and resources that political parties, parliamentary committees, and parliament as a whole dedicate to responding to anti-gender opposition' (Kantola & Lombardo, 2024, p. 8). They include a mix of formal gender rules, such as parliamentary resolutions on gender backlash or rules of procedure that sanction hateful speech and the lack of parity in committees' bureau, as well as informal rules to develop cohesive behaviours within parliamentary groups in support of equality and to articulate orchestrated responses to far-right anti-gender politics. Sometimes, rules are a mix between formal and informal, as Gains and Lowndes (2022) argue, and what is relevant is to identify the 'rules in use' or how institutional actors using the formal rules 'interpret and enact them'. Our analysis of the Catalan case shows that rule-making responses include both *using* existing rules strategically to respond to anti-gender politics and *making* new rules for the same purpose. 'Everyday pragmatic engagement' consists of the individual and collective actions and practices that feminist institutional actors pragmatically adopt in their everyday attempts to engage with actors that oppose gender equality within the shared parliamentary institution. These actions include engaging or not engaging with anti-gender actors by deciding not to respond and ignore them, or rather respond to their comments to debunk them, explain the meaning and relevance of gender equality and propose alternative projects of democratic and egalitarian societies (Kantola & Lombardo, 2024).

Inspired by feminist institutionalism and social movements theories, these four categories allow for a comprehensive picture of feminist institutional responses beyond discursive strategies (Cullen, 2021) to grasp institutional actors' informal and formal practices and examine the role of parliaments and parliamentary equality structures in the contested field of democracy and equality.

## Methods

Our research investigates feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics between 2021 – entrance of the far-right party Vox in the Catalan Parliament – until the end of the 13th-14th legislature in 2024. We have conducted content analysis of secondary sources and 20 semi-structured interviews with MPs, technical personnel and civil society organizations with institutional presence. The selection of secondary sources includes 1) plenary and committee debates and control sessions to the Catalan government on topics such as sexual education programmes, equal access to abortion during COVID-19 lockdown and sexual violence; 2) parliamentary or committee resolutions on sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and LGBTI-phobic violence; 3) internal policy documents, such as the Parliament's Regulation (code of conduct) and Gender Equality Plan; 4) reports from civil society organizations working on sexual and gender reproductive rights, LGBTI rights, and anti-racism; and 5) media and social media content reflecting institutional and MPs' discourses on gender and other inequalities, as well as anti-gender attacks.

The twenty in-person and online interviews conducted in 2022 include political personnel (fourteen), technical personnel (three) and representatives of civil society organizations working on equality and collaborating with parliamentary committees (three). Of those, fifteen interviewees were women, and five were men. The selection of interviewees reflects our research interest in understanding the institutional responses articulated by the Catalan Parliament, political parties, and individual actors against anti-equality opposition. Accordingly, we spoke to personnel and activists whose work was related to gender and other inequalities, such as institutional racism and LGBTIphobia. The selection of interviewees represents the ideological diversity present in Parliament, except for two right-wing national parties and a left-wing regional party that we could not interview despite our attempts.

The interviews, lasting an average of forty-five minutes, were transcribed and coded into pre-defined categories to enable data analysis. The categories correspond to the three areas of our

questionnaire: first, gender divisions of labour and parliamentary dynamics; second, the climate experienced in plenary sessions and equality committees; and third, opposition to gender and other forms of equality and institutional responses. The latter allowed us to identify the actors that respond to attacks on gender equality and categorize the types of responses as rulemaking, everyday pragmatic engagement, coalition-building, knowledge, protection and support. To preserve the interviewees' anonymity, the interviews are referred to as Interview 1, Interview 2 and so on, and the MPs and government members' contributions to parliamentary debates with a code including the party or government position, the proceedings and the date (e.g. Junts\_DSPC-C\_58\_280721). Only the proceedings and the date are included in the citation of the committee's resolutions (e.g. DSPC-C\_92\_25102).

## The irruption of Vox in the Catalan gender-sensitive parliament

The Catalan Parliament offers an interesting case to analyse feminist institutional responses to anti-gender opposition because of the reactions triggered by the entrance of Vox MPs. Before Vox's entrance in 2021, the Catalan Parliament proved highly gender-sensitive (Elizondo and Silvestre 2023). Showing the highest women's descriptive political representation in the last legislature with 47% of women (Cia, 2021)–, the parliament had also improved women's substantive and symbolic representation (Verge, 2020), as shows the organization in 2019 and 2023 of the Women's Parliament, a women-only meeting between civil society and MPs to discuss the status of gender equality (CP, 2019).

Institutionally, the Catalan Parliament has consolidated its gender equality policies and structures, adopting a 2020–2023 Gender Equality Plan for staff and MPs (CP, 2020) and hiring a permanent administrative expert in gender equality policies to lead the pioneering Equality Office (CP, 2020). It also introduced a Protocol on sexual harassment due to sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression (BOPC\_207\_170122, 2022) and non-mandatory training on intersectionality for political and technical personnel (CP, 2021a).

Beyond the parliamentary context, the executive power created in 2021 by a Councillor's Office for Equality and Feminisms, which has adopted new policies – a pioneering menstrual and menopausal equity plan (CG, 2023b) and an antiracist plan – and reinvigorated existing plans – such as the sexual education programme Coeduca't – and has substantially increased the funding of the LGBTI Integral Care Services Network (CG, 2023a). These policies have consolidated Catalonia as one of the most gender-sensitive and LGBTI-inclusive regions in the country (Verge & Alonso, 2020) and Europe (CG, 2023a).

This institutional consolidation of gender equality policies equipped the Catalan Parliament to face the new opposition to gender equality, which our interviewees identify with Vox (Interviews 1–15). Vox entered the Catalan Parliament in March 2021 (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> legislature) with 8.15% of parliamentary seats (CP, 2021c), a more modest result than in other Spanish regions and the national Congress where the party became the third force with 15.2% of seats in 2019 (elpais, 2019) and 12.39% in 2023 (elpais, 2023). Vox's entrance into Parliament also translated into a reduced representation of the other two national-right wing parties, Citizens (Cs) and the Catalan branch of the People's Party (PP), with six and three MPs, respectively (CP, 2021c).

Since Vox's entrance, conflictual dynamics on topics related to migration, gender equality and sexual education, and at the intersection between gender-race and sexuality axes of inequality, have increased in the Catalan Parliament. Vox achieves this gender polarization through three main strategies of direct opposition against gender equality (Chaqués & Lombardo, 2024): first, active boycotting and disrupting gender equality discussions, including altering the formerly 'collaborative' climate within the Equality and Feminisms Committee (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 16); second, violent verbal attacking of women and racialized MPs, also using hate speech, 'linking delinquency with a certain nationality' (Interview 3); third, delegitimation and

vilification of gender and LGBTI issues as policy problems and the actors promoting them, including altering the consensus on debates such as the right to abortion or the violence suffered by the LGBTI community (Interviews 3, 7, 11, 13, 16, 10, Vox\_DSPC-C\_58\_280721, 2021). An example of these strategies is Vox's discursive attacks on civil society organizations working on sexual and reproductive rights, and against LGBTIphobia and racism invited to public hearings (Interviews 10, 11, 14), and motions to withdraw their public funding, an initiative that was stopped by other parliamentary groups (Ara, 2023).

## Mapping feminist institutional responses to antigender opposition

We identify five types of parliamentary actors who respond to Vox's opposition against gender equality: parliamentary groups, individual MPs and members of the government, committees and working groups, extra-institutional actors such as civil society organizations, and, to a lesser extent, the Parliament at an institutional level.

Parliamentary groups are the main actors responding through formal and informal rule-making, such as a 'democratic cordon' to isolate Vox (Interviews 12, 16, 17). Individual MPs and members of the government reporting to the Parliament, such as the Councillor of Equality and Feminism (CE&F), also articulate strategies of knowledge and everyday pragmatic engagement in plenaries to respond to xenophobic or Islamophobic attacks and counter anti-gender discourses, expressing in their responses some awareness of how different inequalities of gender, race and sexuality intersect (Interviews 1, 5, CE&F\_DSPC-P\_30\_17112, 2021a). The Equality and Feminisms Committee is the main space where anti-gender opposition and feminist responses are developed, mainly through knowledge production and coalition-building with extra-parliamentary actors, as well as creating structures such as the Working Group on LGBTIphobia (DSPC-C\_92\_25102, 2021). Extra-institutional actors, mostly experts from civil society organizations, contribute to feminist parliamentary responses to Vox's opposition by providing data (BOPC\_546\_050423, 2023) and co-leading groups like the Intergroup of Sexual and Reproductive Rights. The Parliament as a whole does not have specific mechanisms to respond to anti-equality discourses, such as hate speech. However, the Bureau has called Vox out for aggressive speech (Interview 15) and is studying ways of renewing the Regulation and Code of Conduct to respond to this new form of discrimination (Interviews 1, 8, 13).

We have organized our data about feminist institutional responses based on the categories conceptualized by Kantola and Lombardo (2024), including 'rulemaking', 'everyday pragmatic engagement', 'knowledge' and 'coalition-building'. We contribute to this categorization by adding 'institutionalisation of gender equality' as a preventive strategy and by specifying 'protection and support' as a subcategory of 'pragmatic engagement', which we identify in our data and anti-gender studies (Datta, 2021, 2022). We conceptualize 'prevention' as the function that some pre-existing rules and structures or institutional responses perform, according to Datta (2022), by preparing for anti-gender contestation and anticipating their attacks through research that discovers and exposes their politics and actions to neutralize their strategies. In our study, the preventive function is exemplified by the enabling role of pre-existing feminist governance structures for institutional actors' responses and to act as responses themselves, as well as by a *cordon sanitaire* to mitigate the disruptive impact of far-right anti-gender actors on democracy.

### Formal and informal rule-making

The two main rule-making strategies – *cordon sanitaire* and signing the Zero Tolerance commitment against harassment and discrimination – fulfil the function of preventing Vox's opposition to gender equality. The articulation of a *cordon sanitaire* will be discussed in the section on coalition-building because it results from an alliance to limit Vox's anti-democratic impact. The case of the 'Zero Tolerance Commitment against Harassment and Discrimination' does not involve *making* a new

rule but strategically *using* an existing one to counter anti-gender politics. As stipulated by the Gender Equality Plan (CP, 2020) adopted before Vox's entrance into the Parliament, all parliamentarians should endorse the Zero Tolerance commitment to access the Gender Equity Working Group (CP, 2021a). Since Vox MPs have not signed it, they are formally excluded from this group that aims at promoting equality policies and gender mainstreaming in Parliament (Interviews 6, 9). It has, therefore, a preventive function against the opposition to gender equality, as the exclusion of Vox MPs contributes to containing their obstructionist role to equality and Human Rights (Interviews 3, 17).

To respond to racist and anti-gender attacks, the Bureau of the Catalan Parliament strategically uses pre-existing legislation, such as the Law 19/2020 on Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination (BOE, 2021), to limit racist and Islamophobic language by far-right deputies or to request the correction of expressions that qualify as discrimination crimes (Interviews 9, 13). It has also used internal regulations, such as the Code of Conduct, to call MPs to order (Interview 3). Antiracism appears in interviewees' responses that indicate Vox's speeches associating migration with crime as the main object of this procedure (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16) and in parliamentary debates where the Councillor for Equality and Feminisms reports on measures taken to combat racism (CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_38\_16122021, 2021b; CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_56\_06042022, 2022b). The interviewees perceive a challenge to balance the responses to Vox and the legal protection of freedom of expression. 'The far right has very careful forms, they are very aware of the limits, and they play in that thin margin' (Interview 1). While the parliament has examined whether certain discourses constitute hate crime, sanctioning has not occurred (Interviews 2, 3, 9). There have been conversations on reforming the parliament's regulation to have better mechanisms to deal with new situations since the entrance of the far right, such as economic sanctions against hate speech like the one existing in the European Parliament (Interviews 1, 7, 8, 13, 17). Yet, some interviewees tell us that it is delicate to intervene with a sanction to 'not give Vox more wings' (Interviews 2, 4). According to them, the problem of Vox's attack on equality apparently 'is so constant' that the complaint mechanism is not used except if it is a 'blatant attack', because the deputy's freedom of ideological expression is prioritized (Interviews 4, 8).

An innovative rule-making response is to use institutional declarations to circumvent the lack of unanimity on certain topics. Before Vox entered the Catalan Parliament, all parties used to adopt unanimous parliamentary resolutions to show the institution's support on matters like gender-based violence. Since Vox refused to approve parliamentary resolutions on equality, the rest of the parties decided to read Declarations by the Board of Spokespersons in plenary sessions to provide institutional legitimacy (Interviews 4, 15, 17).

### *Everyday pragmatic engagement*

Daily coexistence with actors who attack and oppose gender equality and Human Rights implies the pragmatic need to contextually decide if and how to interact with this opposition. Interviewees seem to prefer a policy of non-interaction, avoiding engagement with the far right (Interview 14), not entering into a debate and ignoring them (Interview 15) so as not to give Vox the visibility they seek (Interview 7). Some interviewees point out the importance of speaking in positive and constructive terms (Interview 16) and 'building your own narrative' rather than engaging in oppositional narratives (Interview 11), as well as exposing Vox's xenophobic and anti-immigration positions and religious sources of financing as a potential reason for the party's agenda (Interview 15, CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_30\_171121, 2021a; CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_49\_230222, 2022a; CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_83\_091122, 2022c). However, the policy of non-engagement and the debate on how and if to respond to the far right is contested and continuously changing.

The Equality and Feminisms Committee is the typical space where hostility and decisions about everyday pragmatic engagement are staged, as the tone of the discussion has been much more aggressive since Vox's entry (Interviews 1, 3, 10, 11, 13, 16). Vox MP's continuous attacks and boycotting during the Committee sessions disrupt the debates around gender equality. As one



interviewee claimed: 'When you have someone that calls you a baby killer, how can you not reply to this?' (Interview 2). The most significant impact of this hostile environment is the pragmatic decision taken by other Committee members to move some of the discussions with civil society out of the parliamentary arena, holding bilateral meetings outside the institution (Interview 10). Feminist actors from civil society collaborating with MPs perceive they had been 'expelled' from the parliament and that, to advance the agenda on gender equality, they had to find an informal, safer space far from the exposure to the far right's opposition.

Our study allows us to distinguish a specific subcategory of pragmatic engagement responses related to measures of *protection and support* when attacks and hate speech are directed towards MPs, personnel and organizations involved in Parliamentary activity. In the Catalan context, attacks include Vox's accusations to anti-racist, LGBTI and gender equality organizations of receiving unjustified public subsidies (Interviews 7, 11, 14, 15), arguing that these NGOs are 'a chiringuito' (Spanish expression to indicate an organization that makes a corrupt use of public funds) or denying the existence of the inequalities these organizations address and demanding the withdrawal of their funding (Interview 11, BOPC\_542\_300323, 2023). Organizations' representatives feel unprotected from the potential impact that, coming from institutional actors, Vox's parliamentary attacks on civil society could have on their future participation in institutional settings (Interview 10). However, institutional responses of protection are underdeveloped in the Catalan Parliament. 'There is support and empathy for the person attacked' at the individual level, 'but no institutional protection' (Interview 1).

Some antiracist 'support' responses have emerged in the case of MPs suffering online Islamophobic sexist comments, where parliamentary groups have released statements of solidarity, including 'promoting a manifesto for MPs to condemn this type of attitude and speeches' (Interview 1). The degree of formality of these supportive responses is unclear as the expressions of 'sorority' occur at a more 'personal' and 'empathic', thus informal, level. Still, since any MP's statement is publicly registered, these expressions could also be considered a formal repudiation of discriminatory manifestations (Interview 1). The degree of formality also depends on the perception of the offence, whether the attacks are considered 'just words', thus allegedly not allowing for a judicial proceeding (Interview 18), or whether they should be treated as political violence, thus requiring a protocol to protect, for instance, women in politics who suffer violence in their role as politicians (Interview 6).

### **Knowledge production**

The knowledge responses to opposition against equality agendas in the Catalan Parliament are developed mainly by the Equality and Feminisms Committee, the Working Group on LGBTIphobia, the Intergroup of Sexual and Reproductive Rights and the Study Committee on Institutional and Structural Racism. These feminist and equality governance structures invite experts, professionals and academics from civil society and other institutions to provide knowledge on equality issues. Topics include abortion, prostitution, LGBTI rights, gender and anti-LGBTI violence, hate speech and labour conditions of migrant domestic workers (Interviews 4, 7), sometimes through intersectionality knowledge (Working Group on LGBTIphobia, n.d.).

From February to July 2022, the Working Group on LGBTIphobia hosted public hearings of 36 civil society organizations, institutions and members of academia (BOPC\_546\_050423, 2023), while the Study Committee on Institutional and Structural Racism (n.d.) hosted 32 public appearances from February 2022 to June 2023. Some public hearings of civil society organizations introduce intersectionality knowledge in the debate, for example, by discussing LGBTIphobia from the perspective of migration and refugees (Working Group on LGBTIphobia, n.d.). The Intergroup of Sexual and Reproductive Rights organized thematic sessions on climate and sexual justice (CP, 2023b), hate speech against sexual and reproductive rights (CP, 2023a), and 'the antigender offensive' (Intergroup for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, n.d.). In the latter, MPs and feminist experts framed anti-gender

actors as threats to democracy, like in Latin American processes where the far right strategically used anti-gender ideas to consolidate institutional power and reframed civic ‘rights’ through conservative lenses.

These working groups, where MPs and civil society collaborate, also elaborate reports, such as a diagnosis of the increasing LGBTIphobia and the role of hate speech in legitimating this violence in Catalonia (BOPC\_546\_050423, 2023). The elaboration and presentation of such reports in parliament is a knowledge response based on feminist/LGBTQI\*/anti-racist expertise to counteract discourses that deny the existence of discrimination and violence based, in this case, on sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Knowledge production responses seek to increase awareness of equality matters outside and inside the parliament. As such, the training that political and technical personnel receive on gender mainstreaming and equality mechanisms internal to the parliament (Interviews 6, 18) are also examples of this type of response.

The use of specialized data to counterargue anti-gender discourses is another knowledge-production response. MPs and members of the government consult personnel specialized in Human Rights and the far right to argue ‘exposing facts about the issue discussed’ (Interviews 14, 15) and refer to international and national reports (Datta, 2021) to counter anti-gender discourses regarding LGBTIphobia, gender and sexual violence and pro-natalist agendas (Junts\_DSPPC-C\_58\_280721, 2021; CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_30\_171121, 2021a; CE&F\_DSPPC-P\_49\_230222, 2022a).

### Coalition-building

The main alliances among parliamentary groups are those related to the *cordon sanitaire* to isolate Vox, which participants variously refer to as ‘democratic cordon’ (Interviews 12, 16, 17), ‘anti-fascist pact’ (Interviews 2, 7, 13, 15), ‘anti-fascist decalogue’ (Interview 2), or simply as the ‘agreement’ (Interview 1). It refers to a pact that most parliamentary groups – excluding the national right-wing parties Cs and PP – made at the beginning of the legislature in 2021 to isolate the far right. The agreement involved refusing to collaborate with Vox and voting against all its initiatives so as not to legitimize its anti-democratic discourse (Interviews 1, 4, 7, 16, CP, 2021b). Participants in the pact generally agree about its positive results (Interview 16), including Vox’s exclusion from positions of leadership – e.g. committee presidencies and spokesperson offices – and stopping public hearings of anti-Human Rights actors invited by Vox (Interview 2). The memory of the fascist legacy linked to the oppression of cultural and linguistic diversity might have facilitated this ‘antifascist’ coalition among Catalan independentist and leftist Catalan parties (Lombardo et al., 2024).

Other examples of coalition-building in the Catalan Parliament include a collective statement on political violence against women issued by MPs of all parties – except Vox, Cs and PP –, parliamentary staff and journalists working in the chamber (CP, 2022). Similarly, Vox MPs are excluded from cross-party coalitions to protest against gender-based violence because they refuse to participate in statements and minutes of silence condemning femicides (Interviews 3, 7) since they do not recognize ‘gender’ violence but only intra-family violence (Interviews 3, 18).

Outside the Catalan Parliament, MPs make efforts to build informal alliances with members of the European Parliament and the Spanish Congress and Senate regarding potential responses to the opposition against equality: ‘It is more informal because there is still no formal network to fight against this kind of discourse’, ‘we have to spend a lot of time finding allies, we don’t know where they are’ (Interview 1). Other collaborations at the international level are also mentioned: ‘We try to work with a more global perspective because this is not an exclusively Catalan phenomenon but a global one. We try to work in alliance with other actors at the European level, as well as with colleagues in Congress who work with Latin American organizations’ (Interview 1). Some MPs try to follow international reports and participate in forums with other parliaments to understand how they react (Interview 17).

Relevance is also given to parliamentary alliances with feminist organizations and other civil society actors working on equality and Human Rights. The Catalan Parliament has structures

enabling close collaboration within the institution, such as the intergroups co-led by MPs and civil society organizations. Equality experts participating in parliamentary activity include members from associations working on sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTIphobia and racism, which collaborate with the parliamentary groups mentioned in the section on knowledge responses. A relevant coalition between civil society and institutions was the Union against Fascism and Racism, an alliance of activists and MPs that pre-existed Vox's entrance into the parliament but became more visible during the 2024 elections (Interview 14, UCFR, 2024).

### ***Strengthening the institutionalisation of gender equality***

Building on our data, we propose the institutionalization of gender equality as another strategy. While it cannot be strictly defined as a feminist institutional response because the equality structures and policies in the Catalan parliament precede the institutional presence of current forms of anti-gender opposition, they fulfil functions of prevention and legitimation of other feminist responses (Interview 15). The preventive function of these structures and policies shifts the attention from counter dynamics to the institutional capacity of parliaments and parliamentary actors to preserve established equality mechanisms and democratic rights.

The Gender Equality Plan adopted by the Catalan Parliament before Vox's entrance in 2021 acts as a 'prevention' measure against discriminatory conduct, thanks to the training and awareness it provides (CP, 2020). This plan established structures and policies, such as the Equality Office and permanent staff, the anti-harassment protocol and a Gender Equity Working Group, which can be accessed only after signing the 'Zero Tolerance Commitment' and is tasked with mainstreaming gender in Parliament (CP, 2021a). At the time of this research, implementing some of the plan's measures was still being discussed. For instance, the Equality Office was studying the possibility for all bills and legislation to undergo a gender impact assessment (CP, 2020). If appropriately implemented, this measure could counteract anti-gender opposition. The institutionalization of other equality structures, such as the Study Committee on Institutional and Structural Racism, constitutes another preventive response to far-right racist and Islamophobic speech in parliament since it could grant parliamentary institutions a leading role in combating racism.

### **Conclusions**

The impact of the far right on gendering democracy in the Catalan Parliament has not produced gender equality policy backsliding, thanks to a *cordon sanitaire* and the low representation of Vox. Yet, the disruptive impact of far-right anti-gender opposition on parliamentary democracy goes beyond its (small) parliamentary presence, affecting the quality of deliberation through a polarization that not only jeopardizes political debates on gender equality within the parliament arena but pushes them outside the parliament. Building on Gora and de Wilde's (2022) and McCoy et al. (2018) argument about the detrimental effects of polarization for the democratic quality of deliberations, our study reflects the centrality of gender in polarizing dynamics.

Our study contributes to scholarly debates on democratic backsliding in the context of anti-gender politics by proposing to research anti-gender and feminist responses together. It shows how feminist institutional responses enhance the quality of democratic deliberation by creating alliances between civil society and MPs in parliamentary committees. Our study also suggests the need to identify opportunity structures – and constraints – offered by each parliamentary context to counter democratic and equality backsliding.

Different actors, mostly at individual and parliamentary group levels, articulate strategies to negotiate, ignore or respond to the hostile environment on gender and LGBTI topics generated by Vox's entrance into the Catalan Parliament. Parliamentary groups and MPs privilege formal and informal rulemaking and coalition-building, e.g. *cordon sanitaire*, as well as everyday non-interaction engagement strategies, relying on civil society knowledge, and developing alliances

with organizations thanks to the parliamentary procedures that enable their routine collaboration in parliamentary committees. The parliament struggles to devise new rules for an unprecedented democratic situation and to use existing legal instruments to stop exclusionary rhetoric. The limited way the Bureau uses its powers to restrict and sanction speeches containing racist, homophobic or misogynistic language illustrates this. As Ahrens and Palmieri (2024) point out, there is a clear need for further institutional reforms to make parliamentary institutions more gender-sensitive, enhance their capacity to resist anti-gender attacks and improve their democratic quality.

Our study contributes to Kantola and Lombardo's (2024) categories of feminist institutional responses by introducing a 'prevention' function within the strategies of coalition-building and gender equality institutionalization. Parties' cooperative behaviour beyond electoral competition facilitates a *cordon sanitaire*, preventing gender policy backsliding. A strong institutionalization of gender equality within the parliament generates a gender-sensitive context that equips parliaments to face anti-gender challenges. Feminist governance structures enable a favourable institutional culture for elaborating feminist knowledge and increasing awareness against discriminatory conduct. This setting, combined with the role of critical actors, such as the Councillor for Equality and Feminisms, favours the rebuttal of anti-feminist agendas in parliament. We also contribute to Kantola and Lombardo's (2024) categories by fine-tuning *rule-making*, distinguishing the 'making' from the 'strategic use' of existing rules, and adding the subcategory of protection or support of political actors enduring attacks to *everyday pragmatic engagement*.

In a hypothetical scenario in which the parliamentary presence of the far right increases, we can assume that the strength of equality structures will be key to protecting both equality policies and feminist actors inside and outside parliament. In that sense, our study inspires a reflection on the context-dependency of these response categories (Lombardo et al., 2024), which seem to provide a greater explanatory capacity in an institutional context, such as the Catalan parliament, where democratic and equality mechanisms are formally established, and anti-gender opposition does not enjoy a critical mass.

The isolation of a party associated with Franco's regime, such as Vox, an advocate of Spanish national identity and traditional gender norms, occurs in a semi-federal state that grants regions a high degree of self-governing competencies. The institutionalization of gender equality in the Catalan Parliament and the pioneering gender equality policies of the Catalan Government substantiate sovereignty claims of independentist forces regarding Catalonia's distinctiveness and the perception of the anti-gender opposition as backwards and foreign to the Catalan Parliament. This facilitates alertness against Vox's anti-equality impact and reduces partisan dynamics regarding coalition-building and the *cordon sanitaire*. The potential effects of building a *cordon sanitaire* against Vox and the extent to which it is an effective strategy against polarization need further exploration. What is interesting to our analysis is the use actors make of it as a feminist response. Its positive effects are to legitimize and protect equality institutions and policies. Its adverse effects include the reinforcement of Vox's strategies of victimization, providing visibility to its anti-gender discourse, thus potentially contributing to the detrimental effects of polarization.

While our analysis detected the presence of racism and LGBTIQphobia in anti-gender opposition, and responses show some awareness and articulation of antiracism and LGBTIQ equality, future works are needed to explore the intersection of antigenderism and racism and LGBTIQphobia and the articulation of anti-racism and LGBTIQ equality in institutional responses. They could also analyse the interaction of ideological and territorial cleavages to enable and constrain feminist institutional responses. In the Catalan case, identifying a common 'external' enemy represented by the Spanish party Vox partly blurs the ideological divide between Catalan and Spanish right-wing and left-wing parties, facilitating cohesive responses to anti-gender opposition.

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