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Adjusting venues and voices: populist and right-wing parties, the European Parliament and civil society equality organizations 2014–2019

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ABSTRACT

The European Parliament (EP) offers channels for policy input through committees, intragroups, and the commissioning of reports and studies. Civil society equality organizations (CSOs) promoting diversity, gender equality and sexual rights are among the actors using such channels. Today they experience severe cut-backs and direct attacks by populist and radical-right parties who increasingly gained electoral support in several member states. The trajectory on the supranational level is less clear. This article examines the question of whether the increase in populist and right-wing parties in the EP changed how supranational CSOs promoting (gender) equality used venues for making their voice heard in EP policy-making in the 2014–2019 legislature. We investigate the challenges to the relationships between the EP, its committees and political groups, and equality CSOs. Analysing documents and interviews with MEPs and CSOs, our findings show that in the changing political environment, CSOs have moved towards more informal channels of participation, thereby avoiding polarization and conflict and maintaining an effective presence on the political stage.


KEYWORDS

European Parliament; civil society organizations; populism; committee; gender equality; policy-making

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has booked vast achievements on gender equality (Abels & Mushaben, 2012). However, researchers and civil society activists are increasingly critical about the present slow pace of the EU in promoting gender equality (Ahrens & Van der Vleuten, 2019a; Debusscher & van der Vleuten, 2017; Jacquot, 2015). In many EU member states, the growing strength of populist and right-wing parties and their presence in parliaments and government led to massive challenges for national equality machineries and civil society actors. The organizations saw constrained access to public space, reduced resources and confrontation with anti-feminist/anti-gender movements (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). Watchdog groups such as the European Civic Forum's Civic Space Watch (European Civic Forum, 2019) and the

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CIVICUS Monitor document the increasingly adverse landscape for rights groups and problems with freedom of speech and assembly across member states. The landscape particularly impacts civil society organizations concerned with migration, gender identity and human rights.

Simultaneously, many see stagnation, or even backlash on the supranational level (Mushaben, 2019; Van der Vleuten, 2019; Walby, 2018). They cite the retreat of the European Commission (EC) into a soft law approach in gender equality policy (Ahrens, 2019a; Jacquot, 2015; Walby, 2018), the gendered effects of the economic and financial crisis and austerity policies (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014; Walby, 2015) and the growing de-democratization and simultaneous politicization of gender equality in member states (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Roggeband & Krizsan, 2018; Verloo, 2018). Given these negative evaluations of recent activities of the European Commission in terms of gender equality, the European Parliament (EP) with its enhanced powers becomes more interesting in a reconsideration of important European actors for gender equality and its complex facets captured by the term intersectionality (Abels, 2019; Van der Vleuten, 2019).

The EP as an actor for gender equality has received limited attention (Ahrens & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019), with the exception of the activities of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) (Ahrens, 2016; Nugent, 2019). The EP was traditionally a passive recipient of initiatives from the Commission and thus rather toothless. This role has evolved in the last decade making the EP an increasingly important venue for civil society voices.

The EP and its political groups play an important role in linking up with CSOs. They commission reports and provide a channel for input into policy-making through hearings, intergroup activities (Landorff, 2019) and new innovations such as the European Citizen's Initiative (Crespy & Parks, 2019). The EP sees itself as addressing the democratic deficit, yet we know little about to what extent it has provided openings for CSOs concerned with the advancement of gender equality and anti-discrimination agendas such as race, sexualities, age, disability, and religion as laid out in Article 19, Lisbon Treaty (Ahrens, 2019b). We label CSOs that aim to improve citizenship rights and promote equality for often marginalized groups 'equality CSOs' (Ahrens, 2019b). The impact of a changing political composition on the EP's ability to live up to its vaunted openness to civil society is important. It saw a rise in the presence of Eurosceptic, populist and radical right parties since the elections of 2009 and a shift in power towards more conservative and neo-liberal factions (Ahrens & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019).

Here we look at the strength and form of democratic representation provided by equality CSOs in the context of the transformed EP setting. Environmentally the EP is faced with a growing number of Eurosceptic, populist and radical right parties. We ask if the changed political environment of the EP which was precipitated by the increase in populist and far right parties has influenced how transnational equality CSOs participated in EP policy-making in the 2014–2019 legislature. We consider CSOs and the EP as organizations operating as open systems in a political and social environment. This environment has a considerable influence on the choices strategies and behaviour of actors (Morgan, 1997, pp. 33–70). As Golembiewski's (1985) work suggests, public sector organizations are probably even more constrained and affected by environmental forces than private ones.

The changing context places pressures on actors to make strategic decisions for their success and survival. We focus here on gender equality issues and pay particular attention

to the relationships between the FEMM committee and equality CSOs, but also attend to the Civil Liberties Committee (LIBE), because gender and anti-discrimination issues are particularly treated there.¹ Based on EP documents and interviews with MEPs and CSOs, we explore how consolidated transnational equality CSOs cope with a political environment that is changing to their disadvantage.

2. The relationship between the European Parliament and equality CSOs

Research on the interactions between EU institutions, interest groups and civil society has grown (Della Sala & Ruzza, 2007; Friedrich, 2011; Greenwood, 2011; Johansson & Kalm, 2015; Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013; Ruzza, 2004; Sanchez Salgado, 2014). There is also considerable research on women's and feminist CSOs (Cullen, 2015, 2019; Lang, 2009, 2013; Pristed Nielsen, 2013; Reis, 2017; Rolandsen Agustín, 2013a, 2013b; Seibicke, 2019; Strid, 2014). Historically, European transnational gender equality policy-making relied on a loose, informal network, a 'velvet triangle' of devoted feminists circulating through EU institutions, civil society organizations and academia (Hubert & Stratigaki, 2016; Woodward, 2004, 2007). Today, gender equality and EP policy-making, committee hearings, citizen's initiatives and e-petitions, involve a broader participation of equality CSOs which is receiving more attention (Kluger Dionigi, 2017; Nissen & Rolandsen Agustín, 2018; Rolandsen Agustín, 2013a, 2013b). Equality focused CSOs face constant threats, both nationally and supranationally. This is a result of the growing anti-gender mobilization in member states, and populist attacks on civil society in general (Kemper, 2014; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018).

For CSOs, political actions depend on the way institutions and structures furnish opportunities and on the strategic choices and agency of the movement organizations themselves (Della Sala & Ruzza, 2007; Greenwood, 2011; Irvine et al., 2019). Ruzza (2015) found that the financial and economic crisis changed relationships between CSOs working on anti-discrimination and EU institutions so that 'involvement in EU processes and the entire structure of the EU participatory environment is now an institutionalized myth' (p. 36).

The directly-elected EP is open to civil society and encourages CSO lobbying activities (Landorff, 2019; Sanchez Salgado, 2014). It relies on CSOs to provide information during legislative processes (Parks, 2009), and also to help legitimate policy decisions (Greenwood, 2011). Since the Lisbon Treaty gave a more prominent role to the EP in EU policy-making and altered its internal composition there are changed access points for CSOs. The growing number of expert groups, committees, and semi-elected bodies designed by various institutions shape strategies and activities of the burgeoning landscape of supranational equality CSOs (Ahrens, 2019b; Sanchez Salgado, 2014). Building on Rule 206 of the EP Rules of Procedure, it has become common practice across time to invite recognized CSOs, interest group representatives and (academic) experts to EP committee hearings. For equality CSOs, such hearings play an important role in forming the EP policy agenda and positioning them vis-à-vis the Commission and the Council (Pristed Nielsen & Rolandsen Agustín, 2013; Rolandsen Agustín, 2013b). Alongside women's movements, LGBT movements became similarly active on the supranational level. The International Lesbian and Gay Association Europe (ILGA-Europe) was successful in setting up close ties with the EP and making LGBT movement voices heard (Ayoub,

2016). On the other hand, movements focusing on intersectional aspects of equality (such as ethnicity and gender) have sometimes had more difficulties in finding access on at the EU institutional level (Ahrens, 2019b; D'Agostino, 2018; Stubbergaard, 2015).

The reciprocal relationship between EP committees and equality CSOs – information in exchange for access – was stable for a long time. This began to experience changes in form and function as an increasing number of less progressive MEPs (Ruzza, 2015) and MEPs working against gender equality in the EP who found their way into core committees like FEMM put up obstructions. Gender equality and anti-discrimination turned into contentious and politicized issues (Ahrens, 2018b; Warasin et al., 2019). In comparison to advocates of underprivileged groups, conservative forces occupy powerful political positions (Roggeband, 2018, pp. 29–32).

Even if policy tools such as gender mainstreaming adopted by the EU (TEU §3(2)) or gender budgeting stipulate participatory processes and the involvement of civil society, the recent EP implementation of these strategies reveals an alarming disregard of participatory elements (Ahrens, 2019c; Cengiz, 2019). Still, some CSOs' have worked together with MEPs towards a higher representation of women in parliament. For example, the European Women's Lobby ran the 50/50 Women for Europe – Europe for Women campaign focusing on gender balance since the 2009 EP elections. According to our interviews, activists were offered space at European offices in several member states in the up run to the 2019 elections as support for their efforts in collaboration with female MEPs across parties. Overall, the recent history of EP-equality CSO relationship as regards equality issues has become more complicated thanks to the changed political balances illuminated in the next section.

3. The EP and populist and right-wing parties

EP political groups transformed considerably over the last ten years (Abels, 2020). Only the European Peoples Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Greens/EFA remained relatively stable in composition. The EP does not form a 'government' in the normal parliamentary sense, and the two biggest groupings, the EPP and S&D often formed a decisive 'grand coalition' and steered the (legislative) proposals in the last EP legislatures. With the 2019 elections, they lost their majority and need additional coalition partners. The share of MEPs who potentially position themselves against progressive EU gender equality policies increased considerably in the 2009, 2014 and 2019 EP elections (Abels, 2020; Zacharenko, 2019). The political groups of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), all gained more seats over time (cf. Table 1). Given their political agenda, many of their MEP's have a conservative or populist agenda on gender and anti-discrimination issues (Kemper, 2014; Krizsan & Siim, 2018; Warasin et al., 2019; Zacharenko, 2019).

Gender equality has grown in importance for all political groups in two ways. First there are more women. As the parliament moves towards gender parity, groups are concerned about gender balance (Abels, 2020; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). This data is now reported officially on the EP website to help build an image of the EP as being fair to women, but it also exposes the extent to which groups respect gender balance. In the 2009–2014 and 2014–2019 legislatures, GUE/NGL and Greens/EFA, followed by S&D and

Table 1. Political Groups in the EP 2004–2019, share of seats in %, outgoing EP.

Name	2004– 2009	2009– 2014	2014– 2019
European People's Party (EPP)	36.69%	35.73%	28.84%
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)	27.77%	25.52%	24.70%
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	12.74%	10.86%	9.21%
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	5.48%	7.46%	6.94%
European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)	0%	7.46%	10.28%
Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	5.10%	4.58%	6.94%
Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN)	5.61%	0%	0%
Independence/Democracy Group	2.80%	0%	0%
Europe of Freedom and (Direct) Democracy (EF(D)D)	0%	4.06%	5.61%
Europe of Nations and Freedom Group (ENF)	0%	0%	4.81%

Source: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/european-results/2019-2024/> as of January 2020.

ALDE, were the most gender equal political groups, followed by a moderate representation of women in EFDD, while ECR and EPP were at the lower end (ENF not included in the analysis). The EPP only recently took steps to enhance women's representation and tackle gender inequality within their group (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019).

Secondly, gender equality and related issues have become an increasingly contested topic in committees, political groups, and plenary (Ahrens, 2018b; Ahrens & Van der Vleuten, 2019b; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016, 2019). A major change in the external political environment of the European Parliament is the growing global opposition to gender equality and sexual rights, with right-wing and religious actors attacking gender equality at the national and international level (Kováts, 2018; Köttig et al., 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). This is reflected in the national parties represented in the EP (Kemper, 2014; Krizsan & Siim, 2018). ECR, EFDD, ENF and non-attached right-wing MEPs were almost equally opposed to anti-discrimination policies and pursued similar xenophobic and nationalist positions (Janssen, 2013), even though xenophobic and nationalist positions are unevenly distributed, with a great deal of variation between countries (Krizsan & Siim, 2018). However, in the FEMM committee in this period, the centre-left coalition of S&D, ALDE, GUE/NGL and Greens/EFA influenced the position of the committee. They took a less reactionary position than the debates reflected in the EP plenary (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016, 2019; Warasin et al., 2019). In the FEMM committee in the 2014–2019 term, the cohesion within the centre-right wing was lower than in centre-left wing groups meaning that the right was seldom concertedly proactive. However, at the plenary level, intra-group cohesion was generally high and the large political groups entered into coalitions (Warasin et al., 2019). Overall, the conservative groups of ECR, EFDD, ENF usually voted against FEMM committee compromises, but did not initiate any proposal themselves (Ahrens, 2018b). For the LIBE committee a similar analysis is lacking. The intersection of gender equality with migration policies led to tensions within and between political groups (Nissen & Rolandsen Agustín, 2018).

4. Equality CSOs in a changing environment – expectations and implications

Against the background of the rise of populist and far right parties and the changed role of the EP, we expect that the relations of European transnational civil society working for

gender equality issues with the EP will be affected by these developments. This transformed political environment at the European level might lead to a shutting out of progressive civil society voices working for intersectional equalities.

We conceptualize the EP as an organization existing in an environment in interaction with other organizations – among them equality CSOs – and assume changes in environment will change behaviours on both sides. There is a significant literature in social movement theory about how CSO groups strategically try to manoeuvre (not always successfully) environmental threats (see for overviews Della Sala & Ruzza, 2007; Irvine et al., 2019; Roggeband, 2018) which we feel can be enhanced by considering the European Parliament as an organization operating in an environment.

Roggeband (2018) highlights the rise of counter movements as a likely response to successful mobilization around equality issues. She distinguishes three set of factors that may help understanding counter movements (2018, pp. 34–35): First, equality CSOs and counter movements act in the same opportunity structure, yet, in certain settings such as deteriorating democracy, the conservatives can count on powerful support from the state or, for instance, the Catholic Church. Second, counter movements often have better resources than equality CSOs. Third, transformative equality frames are much more challenging to broader society than frames defending the status quo. Consequently, ‘women’s organizations may close or exit certain arenas they previously used to advance their claims’ (Roggeband, 2018, p. 33). This change of venues is also a likely option for equality CSOs at EU level. Besides the formal participation in committee hearings the EP offers a multitude of other options ranging from contacting specific political groups and MEPs to utilizing informal meeting spaces like intergroups or workshops.

Other factors also shape a more negative environment for CSOs interacting with the EP today. First, the austerity crisis and attendant pessimism reorganized gender equality policy entrepreneurs at the Commission level. This was compounded by the move of the topic from DG Employment to DG Justice in 2010 in connection with the reframing of gender equality in terms of anti-discrimination. This move led to a severe perturbation in established networks between CSOs and the European Commission (Ahrens, 2018a, 2019b; Jacquot, 2015). Second, as outlined above, the overall political and societal climate for promoting gender equality and sexuality rights altered negatively. Third, gender mainstreaming as a policy approach stalled in the Commission which also lowered policy output and initiatives in this policy field (Ahrens & Van der Vleuten, 2019a; Jacquot, 2015; Walby, 2018). Finally, women’s and feminist movements found new CSO players like pro-life groups grabbing places in the field with the expansion of discrimination grounds that intersected with gender (such as migration and gender or sexuality issues). This was further compounded by the resurgence of anti-gender and anti-feminist counter movements. Overall, we expected to find considerable adjustments in the 2014–2019 period due to such environmental changes in and around the EP and the changing character and goals of actors.

5. The EP, political groups and civil society 2014–2019: data and methodology

This article builds on several data sources allowing for data triangulation over a longer period of time by contrasting the results iteratively. We compiled a dataset of all public

hearings of the FEMM and LIBE committee during the last two legislatures, 2009–2014 and 2014–2019, and then extracted the ones related to gender equality and other grounds of discrimination where supranational equality CSOs participated. We focused on these two committees, because they are the ones predominantly in charge of gender equality and anti-discrimination files, despite the EP gender mainstreaming obligation and struggles with other committees engaged with equality issues such as EMPL.

Next to analysing the committee hearings, we compared them with different sets of qualitative interviews with CSO representatives, MEPs, and activists throughout the 2014–2019 legislature (cf. supplemental appendix provided online). Interviews about changing strategies in relation to the European Parliament were carried out with CSOs working either centrally or as part of their general activities with gender equality (EWL, ILGA-Europe, Social Platform, COFACE, ENAR, AGE, European Youth Forum, European Disability Forum, ERGO, ETUC). We selected these CSOs because they focus on at least one ground of discrimination, are large supranational umbrella organizations (often created and sustained with EU funding), and regularly favoured by the European Commission in consultations (Cullen, 2010; Rolandsen Agustín, 2013a).

The organizational representatives were asked about their perceptions of the evolution of relations and style of relations with EU institutions and in particular the EP in this legislature. As for the EP, questions concerned the amount of times CSOs had witnessed for the EP or presented research or been commissioned for research, and whether they perceive a paradigm shift in the way the EP relates to them as a result of the changed conditions for politics (socioeconomic austerity, rise of populist parties, rise of migration protest, Brexit, shift to neoliberal policy approaches). Finally, we monitored websites of CSOs and the EP as well as secondary literature for interactions between CSOs and the EP to supplement and validate the information from committee hearings and interviews.

This material allowed us to explore how equality CSOs operate given the growing number of populist and far right parties in the EP opposing their claims. The public hearings were analysed in terms of who spoke on what and how often in EP hearings in FEMM and LIBE. In addition, we collected examples from secondary literature of successes and failures of CSOs in mobilizing for gender equality in the EP and its committees. Interview data was used to trace changes in interactions and venues that CSOs chose to participate in EP policy-making. We contrasted the findings with the data on hearings and examined the extent to which political groups made a difference for access and who initiates engaging CSOs in EP policy-making: CSOs, MEPs, political groups or other actors.

5.1. Interaction between committees, political groups and civil society: successes and failures in gender equality policy 2014–2019

The increase in MEPs potentially opposing gender equality and collaborating or sympathizing with ‘uncivil’ society mobilizing against gender equality can be illustrated by looking at two core EP reports in the 2009–2014 legislature, the Estrela-Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (2013) and the Lunacek-Report on the EU Roadmap against homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity (2013). Religious and right-wing actors mobilized against both reports with an online petition, by spamming the rapporteurs with emails and managing to get their statements repeated by ECR, ENF and EPP MEPs (Hentges & Nottbohm, 2017;

Kemper, 2014). Similar mobilizations continued in the 2014–2019 legislature, for instance, regarding the Noichl-Report on the EU Strategy for equality between women and men post 2015 (Hentges & Nottbohm, 2017). While the Lunacek – and Noichl-Report were adopted in the end, the Estrela-Report witnessed a hostile take-over: EPP and ECR proposed an alternative version that replaced the more progressive version.

Another informative case of EP-CSO relations is the failure of the maternity leave directive in 2015 – seven years after the European Commission proposed its revision (Ahrens & Abels, 2017; Kluger Dionigi, 2017; Seibicke, 2019). The European Women’s Lobby and trade unions successfully lobbied the FEMM committee S&D rapporteur and other committee members to extend the Commission proposal but this made it more controversial for member states represented in the Council (Kluger Dionigi, 2017). Simultaneously, employer’s associations and member states lobbied centre-right MEPs, particularly from EPP, to vote against the FEMM committee positions. EPP MEPs hesitated to follow suit, because they lacked a majority in committee and in plenary and voting against improving mother’s rights was seen as damaging the party image. While the EP legislative resolution was in the end adopted with slim majority, several national delegations in EPP and ALDE left the official group line, which is quite unusual, and voted against the proposal (Kluger Dionigi, 2017).

A closer look at the core committees for gender equality and anti-discrimination, FEMM and LIBE, suggests crucial changes in EP hearings and the role of CSOs. Out of 457 committee hearings in the legislature 2009–2014, FEMM and LIBE held 19 each. In the 2014–19 legislature FEMM held 44 and LIBE 42 out of a total of 552 committee hearings. Thus, the number of hearings organized by the two committees increased considerably. The reasons are still open to speculation beyond this article. Low numbers of legislative proposals by the Commission may be countered by EP committees with more non-legislative actions such as hearings. Extended EP powers after the Lisbon Treaty may have led to increasing committee activities in previously limited policy fields. Nonetheless, when counting the

Table 2. FEMM and LIBE committee hearings 2009–2014 and 2014–2019.

	FEMM		LIBE		Thereof joint hearings FEMM / LIBE	
	2009–2014	2014–2019	2009–2014	2014–2019	2009–2014	2014–2019
Total number of hearings	19	44	19	42	1	6
Number of hearings with CSOs participating	9	7	2	3	0	1
Participating equality CSO and number of appearances	AGE (1) ENoMW (1) EWL (3) EYF (1)	COFACE (2) EDF (1) ETUC (3) EWL (4)	AGE (1) EDF (1) ENAR (1) ERGO (1) ILGA (1) Social Platform (1)	EDF (1) ERGO (1) EWL (1) EYF (1) Intersex (1) Social Platform (1)		EWL (1)

Source: data collection by authors from central document register of the EP website. Explanation abbreviations: AGE = AGE Platform Europe; COFACE = COFACE Families Europe; EDF = European Disabilities Forum; ENAR = European Network Against Racism; ENoMW = European Network of Migrant Women; ERGO = European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network; ETUC = European Trade Union Confederation; EWL = European Women’s Lobby; EYF = European Youth Forum; ILGA = International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

participation of supranational CSOs (including CSOs not working on gender equality or anti-discrimination) in hearings, their participation seemed to decrease (cf. Table 2).

From 2009–2014, CSOs participated in almost 50 per cent of the FEMM hearings (9 out of 19) and in about 10 per cent of LIBE hearings (2 out of 19). In the 2014–2019 legislature, CSOs participated in only about 15 per cent FEMM hearings and less than eight per cent of LIBE hearings. Moreover, FEMM and LIBE collaborated on many more hearings (six) in the 2014–2019 legislature. Even though these were all concerned with gender equality issues, only one CSO directly working on gender equality, the EWL, was invited for one session, the hearing on ‘The EU Accession to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence’ (27 March 2017). For this highly contentious topic, EWL was invited alongside representatives from academia, the Council of Europe, French public administration, and the two EP rapporteurs (see further details below). As the data suggests, hearings have become more common and numerous, but not to the direct benefit of supranational equality CSOs.² Moreover, joint hearings have increased in numbers which may be a result of changes originating from the Lisbon Treaty (in force 2009) which finally enforced the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (CFR). While FEMM draws its competencies from the Rome Treaty (1957) and Amsterdam Treaty (1997), LIBE’s competencies increased considerably with the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty and the CFR. Our data suggests that the extended competencies allowed FEMM and LIBE to address intersectional aspects, for instance the situation of migrant women, in joint hearings.

Noticeable is the increasingly clear split of CSOs along grounds of discrimination between the two committees. From 2014 to 2019, FEMM invited primarily CSOs with specializations focused on gender equality (EWL, COFACE, ETUC) while it was a little bit more diverse in the previous period from 2009 to 2014 (ENoMW, AGE, EYF). Meanwhile, LIBE invited equality CSOs focused on other grounds of discrimination (ENAR, Social Platform, ILGA-Europe, AGE, EDF, ERGO, Intersex, EYF) but with the exception of joint hearings, no women’s organizations or trade unions. The two LIBE hearings in the period 2009–2014 were ‘The EU Strategy on Roma Inclusion’ (joint hearing with the Employment committee, 30.11.2010) with participation of ERGO, and ‘Unblocking the Anti-Discrimination Directive’ (20.3.2012) where the remaining CSOs listed in Table 2 participated. The seven FEMM hearings from 2014 to 2019 were strongly focused on employment and social policy (see also below), which explains the involvement of ETUC and COFACE: ‘Measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment at workplace, in public spaces, and political life in the EU’ (20.6.2017), ‘Improving the Work-Life balance for formal and informal carers’ (joint hearing with EMPL Committee, 23.6.2017).

Besides participating formally in committee hearings, CSOs developed media-effective campaigns particularly around the EP elections in 2014 and 2019 and sought to strengthen links with MEPs through direct collaboration, thereby opening up new informal venues. It is important to understand, though, that this was less directed towards shaping EU policies than mobilizing for democratic and inclusive elections and against certain populist parties and political groups in the EP opposing full equality. The EWL ran the campaign *European Parliament 50/50* for the 2009, 2014 and 2019 elections.³ The campaigns focused on promoting women in politics and EU gender equality policies and EWL sought MEPs and candidates to endorse their election manifesto. The 2014 signatories were from EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, but not from ECR or EFD. For the 2019 elections, the

campaign was launched in the European Parliament. Information on which MEPs endorsed it is not available.

Other CSOs followed with campaigns in the 2014 elections. ENAR and ILGA-Europe joined forces and started the #NoHateEP2014 campaign. The campaign appeal was signed by S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL, while EPP 'expressed their support'⁴ without signing; ECR and EFD did not sign. The 2019 election campaign #ElectNoHate witnessed an even broader coalition by 22 CSOs, among them ENAR, Transgender Europe, ILGA-Europe, EYF, ETUC, ERGO, Social Platform, and EDF. Information on which MEPs and political groups supported it was not available.⁵ ILGA-Europe ran an additional campaign, 'Come Out', and targeted EP candidates. The signatures to the pledge came predominantly from candidates of S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA, and GUE/NGL. Signing EPP candidates came from Scandinavia, while ECR, EFDD, and ENF candidates did not appear on the overview of signatories.⁶

This section illustrates the formal participation of CSOs in EP policy-making and their public campaigning around equality issues. It might seem from the data that CSOs were being closed out of formal participation. Nonetheless, much of the work done by CSOs happens informally and – as we will argue in the next section – they adapted their strategies to the changed political environment in the EP.

5.2. Finding venues and voice: equality CSOs and the EP

Our interviews with the major organizations promoting gender equality point to a different picture behind the formal participation numbers. Earlier set of interviews (2014–2015) with these transnational actors focusing on the impact of austerity measures and their networks had already shown that these negative developments were strong at the national level. The professional bureaucracies in Brussels were holding steady. Over the course of this legislature, the interpretation of the informants thus far is that the relative lack of formal consultation from the EP, if at all, had more to do with the fact that gender equality issues had not been put formally on the agenda by the Commission and the Council than as a result of resistance to their expertise. For instance, several interviewees mentioned that interaction increased with the Maternity Leave at the beginning of the legislature and also with the Work-Life-Balance Directive towards the end of the term. Overall, our interviews suggest the EP-equality CSO scene is now less front-stage and more back-stage and informal. We find a decrease in formal presence, but a perception of increased informal access by key actors.

5.2.1. Continuing formal venues

None of the 6 major organizations re-contacted in 2019 felt that there had been a diminishment in the times that they had been contacted for providing their own formal written input or reports to the parliament between 2014 and 2019. They had concluded between 0 and 2 formal commissioned reports. All of the organizations contacted had also provided inputs to official reports on their areas of interest. Interviewees did acknowledge when asked about our figures of providing testimony in committees that perhaps they had been invited less often to formal meetings with the parliament. However, they felt they had been invited for the relevant issues when they were on the agenda.

Yes, probably to a certain extent [we are less invited formally] I perceive less formal invitations, but what was happening as well is that the EP was not really, didn't really do big moves in the last five years- In terms of gender equality there was not very much happening Informal consultation is rather frequent- that's very frequent, particularly lots of amendments to reports ... we are invited to give input informally frequently, especially amendments but other things as well. [Interview EWL 2019]

There was no comment that the EP was purposely keeping them out of the loop but there were only two major gender equality issues on board in the period. Regulating maternity and paternity leave and providing a basic level of paid leave for parents has been the subject of a directive proposal for decades. Disagreement about how to provide payment and the eligibility of fathers and mothers (as well as the link to maternity-health care payments) and general opposition from several Member States had led this directive to the honourable place of the last gender equality directive not to be passed. It was slated to be withdrawn from the table forever, but in 2017, thanks in part to a coalition of civil society entrepreneurs including activists within ETUC and COFACE, the purpose of the directive was reconceived not as a gender but as an employment matter (Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU). Importantly, this directive is hard legislation just as most gender equality experts believed there would never be another directive.

Informants were also positive about the ability of CSOs to organize central and local hearings about trying to ratify the Istanbul Convention about gender-based violence. Here the women/gender-based lobby organizations were actively involved in trying to get member state commitment to ratification of the Convention off the ground.

5.2.2. Strengthening informal venues

Our own reflective interviews and statistical data imply a diminishing level of invitations to participate in formal hearings, but interviewees indicated that this was more than made up for in the level of informal consultations with MEP's directly, at events and at informal gatherings. Two organizations noted that they had also been informally consulted by other committees than FEMM to provide or comment on amendments to initiatives with gender impact. All also indicated an upsurge of direct contact with MEP's and had been enhancing their networks with individual supporters within the EP.

Newly elected MEPs come to us and we do not go to them. The dynamics are changing, we are in touch with things all the time because we are watchdogs ... when you arrive you need to find out who is doing what—some MEPs are cleverer than others and know how to use civil society better than others, So at the European level it has actually gotten better. [Interview COFACE 2019]

According to the interviews, one of the reasons for more contact is that MEPs believe a higher level of engagement is necessary in the more polarized environment caused by populists and right-wing parties mobilizing against gender equality. Moreover, they are looking for weapons against the increasingly sophisticated reframing of opposition to gender and sexual equality issues, and advocacy organization researchers are able to provide them with data and arguments to respond.

So our level has been high or even higher than before, so the point is and we see that even more, there is a cluster of MEPs that really feel because of the presence of the far right we need to do even better and therefore they contact us even more, so I would really say it played in our favour. [Interview ENAR 2019]

Respondents noted that open hostility to EP and EC financial support to NGO's has been continuous with a peak in a report launched by a German EPP member attempting to tighten finance rules for NGO's by using the financial transparency regulations (European Parliament, 2017). While it seems that the aim of the measure proposed was to harm environmental and political CSOs, (Tamma, 2017) the repeated questioning of the legitimacy of funding social and environmental organizations has been an ongoing story, which receives loud support from right-wing and populist politicians.

6. Conclusion

Earlier research on the impact of the austerity responses between 2007 and 2014 seemed to indicate that austerity measures primarily hit grassroots and member state level CSOs, and had a less direct impact on the transnational CSOs dependent on EU funding (Sanchez Salgado, 2017; Woodward, 2016). What we can conclude about transnational equality CSOs and their perspective on the development of gender equality in the last EP legislature of 2014–2019 in the changing environment is that the actors have maintained a presence on the stage despite the harsh winds. They have not folded, and do not seem to feel too threatened. As suggested by organizational theory on how organizations manage to survive in threatening environments, these organizations adapt and rethink themselves. They accept growing informal access as a positive development widening their scope of resistance. Thus, both CSOs and MEPs developed a relevant and innovative accommodation strategy offering CSOs effective inroads in EP policy-making while closing out populist and radical-right countermovements and avoiding further polarization and conflict.

From the perspective of social movement research, these organizations are adapting to the political opportunity structure by finding new pathways to policy-makers and funding, even as their formal presence as interlocutor has seemingly lessened. The campaigns around the Work-Life Balance Directive indicated an ability to expand alliances beyond the purely gender-based, implicating civil society actors working on equality issues more generally.

Overall, the EP has become an ever more important contact for CSOs working on gender+ equality issues, given the recent low profile of the European Commission. There was a change of venue inside the EP structure and CSOs moved their activities from formal to informal channels. Contrary to what might be anticipated, populist parties seem to have been less disastrous for relationships between the EP, its committees and CSOs than expected. The reason for this unexpectedly low impact is due to adaptation techniques of CSOs and non-populist MEPs pro-activism. In this way the equality CSOs do not accommodate the populist challenge, but their opposition does not necessarily lead to conflict and polarization, as their move to more informal venues allows them to continue discrete opposition weaponised with arguments and evidence.

The environment for the FEMM committee and gender/equality rights CSOs seems neutral to favourable in the EP in the last years, and seems to be provided for in the

future. In terms of numbers, the 2019–2024 Parliament will be nearer gender parity than ever (40.5 per cent), but will hold many neophytes (almost 425/751 MEP's will be serving their first term and many of the newcomers are women). The strong effort to suppress the FEMM committee seems to have ceased although the populist forces in the EP regularly file a report on CSOs as unnecessary money wasters without democratic representation credentials. Even with the departure of the British, this agenda point of the far right is sure to continue, so that the coast is never clear.

Civil society respondents, being activists, are looking toward the future with some hope. The apparent seriousness that new Commission President Ursula von der Leyen took in composing a gender parity Commission is one sign that there may be a possibility for a more nuanced and progressive approach to gender. The appointment of Christine Lagarde to the European Central Bank might also mean positive news for proposed but sleeping directive proposals such as that for quota's for gender representation on corporate boards. Even the painful Brexit, which will unfortunately mean the loss of progressive British voices on anti-discrimination/racial gender sexuality issues could also provide good news. The raucous, media-successful British populist Eurosceptics (with their anti-gender edge) will now be less able to provide frames for their non-English speaking populist colleagues. It seems that even if the winds for civil society organizations working on equality issues are increasingly harsh, these organizations and actors manage to be successful in continually adapting by changing strategies to fit the situation.

Notes

1. The EP obliged itself to implement gender mainstreaming and thus all committees should promote gender equality in their work (Ahrens, 2019c). Promoting gender equality and anti-discrimination are, however, predominantly treated in FEMM and LIBE, although FEMM often clashes with the Employment Committee (EMPL) about responsibilities (Ahrens, 2016).
2. We also compiled the data for other hearing participants and the share for international organisations (other EU institutions, UN, ILO etc), interest groups and other actors increased in line with the number of hearings.
3. Cf. <https://womenlobby.org/-European-Parliament-50-50-Campaign-?lang=en>.
4. Cf. <https://www.enar-eu.org/Campaign-with-NoHateEP2014>.
5. Cf. <https://www.enar-eu.org/NoHate>.
6. <https://www.comeout.eu/who-has-signed/>.

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