

In the Search for a Room of One's Own: Gendered Power Structures in the Council of the European Union

KATARZYNA SZKUTA

Introduction

The central thesis of Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" (2004/1929) posits that every woman needs a private space for creative work – a privilege historically granted to men. Through this metaphor I examine the call for a dedicated gender equality configuration in the Council of the European Union (Council), a key intergovernmental decision-making body, even though in most policy sectors it acts today as co-legislator with the European Parliament (EP). I also test empirically if the gender mainstreaming (GM) approach introduced in the Amsterdam Treaty (Jacquot 2010, 2015) supports or weakens the claim for a separate gender equality configuration. As of 1998 the only avenue for meetings of ministers in charge of gender equality are informal meetings (often called informal councils) (Jacquot 2015). Using a resistance-centered Feminist Institutionalism (FI) approach (Kantola/Waylen 2024), I explore power dynamics in advancing or hindering gender equality within the European Union (EU). I analyse the formal and informal rules hindering or pushing for a broader institutionalization of gender equality policy promised by the Amsterdam Treaty's GM provision, notably the difficulties of the creation of a dedicated Council formation for gender equality. I combine an accidental ethnography method (Levitan/Carr-Chellman/Carr-Chellman 2017) based on my first-hand experience with an analysis of Council documents such as conclusions and steering notes for policy debates.

My analysis contributes to the broader literature of gendered dynamics within EU institutions and complements existing research on the European Commission (Commission) and the EP (e.g. Ahrens/Meier/Rolandsen Agustin 2023; Elomäki et al. 2023), with insights about the Council, which is the most under-researched among the three key institutions (but see Abels 2020; de Silva/Tepliakova 2024; de Silva 2025). I focus on the leadership role of the Council Presidency in setting the gender equality agenda and the various subtle dimensions of power that organise the Council's work. Abels (2020) identified both as areas needing further study.

I first introduce the Council's setting regarding gender equality policy, followed by discussing my theoretical framework, data and methods. I then present my empirical findings and conclusions.

Unpacking the Council of the EU

While the EU showed strong commitment to gender equality during the 2019-2024 legislature (Abels/Mushaben 2020), this policy area in the Council still lacks the

institutional legitimacy of others. The EP has a dedicated Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM, established in 1979 following the first direct EP elections presided by Simone Veil), and the Commission has a Commissioner responsible for equality (with a unique portfolio between 2019-2024), yet, the Council still lacks a corresponding configuration (Elomäki/ Ahrens 2022).

The Council negotiates and adopts EU legislation. In cases where the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP) applies since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, it is co-legislator with the EP. Both institutions act on the initiative of the Commission. The Council operations are managed by the General Secretariat. Legislative proposals coming from the Commission are first reviewed by national experts in Council working parties chaired by the rotating six-month Council Presidency (Tallberg 2008). Proposals then go to the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper), i.e. the member states ambassadors to the EU, and compromises are adopted in formal Council meetings by national ministers. As part of the OLP, the Council first adopts a negotiating mandate for the so-called trilogues (i.e. negotiations with the EP and the Commission), and – in case of a political deal on the compromise text – the final decision on the legislative proposal.

The Council's ten configurations address specific policy areas, such as foreign affairs and environment. However, only the General Affairs Council (GAC) with its special coordination role and responsible for institutional, administrative and horizontal matters and the Foreign Affairs Council are mentioned in the EU treaties.

Currently, none of the formal Council configurations explicitly addresses gender equality. The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) includes it partially without exemplifying it in the title. Gender equality and antidiscrimination issues within employment and social policy are reflected in the description of the work on the Council website (Council of the European Union 2025). It can be inferred, and this hypothesis will be further tested in the article, that other aspects of gender equality policy are addressed within different Council configurations, adhering to the principle of GM codified by the Amsterdam Treaty (1997). To respond to this lacuna, several presidencies organised informal meetings of gender equality ministers demonstrating their interest in stronger coordination on this policy.

In sum, the legislative process in the Council involves a network of actors, including national experts, attachés, ministers, and permanent representatives. In the next section I present my theoretical framework to analyse GM and gender equality in the Council.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist institutionalism (FI) examines how institutional rules enable or constrain transformative change toward gender equality shaped by evolving power relations (Weiner/MacRae 2014; Kantola/Dahl 2005). FI reveals the gendered foundations