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The problem is not ‘descriptive’, but ‘substantive’ representation? A content analysis of gendered patterns in parliamentary behaviour in the European parliament

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Abstract

The European Parliament (EP) is often presented as one of the ‘success stories’ regarding gendered descriptive representation: the representation of female MEPs has grown from 15.2 percent (1979) to almost 40 percent in the latest European elections (2019). On this account, the EP surpasses almost all national parliaments. Yet, another line of research has shown that institutional practices and individual legislative behaviour do not always evolve towards greater gender equality. Beyond the so-called ‘EU exceptionalism’, recent studies have observed that legislative behaviour and parliamentary activities do reflect a gendered pattern, female MEPs and male MEPs acting differently. The latter questions the ability of female MEPs to develop a ‘substantive’ representative agenda, beyond their mere presence in terms of ‘descriptive’ representation. This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by identifying and explaining gendered patterns in legislative behaviour, studying the use of 163.279 written parliamentary questions (WPQs) introduced by 2.262 MEPs over 25 years (1994-2019). For that purpose, the paper relies on a quantitative content analysis via policy dictionaries identifying 22 EU policy domains covered in WPQs. First, we determine whether female and male MEPs tend to specialize in policy fields that are considered “hard versus soft policy domains”. Our contribution is first to provide a systematic comparative empirical account based on an extensive quantitative analysis of gendered legislative patterns in the EP. Second, we furthermore test for the moderating effects of political-institutional factors which suggest that the gendered patterns in MEPs’ behaviour can be explained by types of parliamentary procedures (priority questions), individual background (seniority in the EP) as well as institutional distribution of power (strength and prestige of committees). While our empirical analyses do reveal the presence of a gender pattern in parliamentary behaviour, the gender gap has been reducing over time. In the latest legislative terms, female MEPs focus almost as much on hard policy domains as male MEPs. Furthermore, we observe the moderating effects of seniority: gender differences are the strongest for female newcomers, while they vanish for the most experienced female MEPs. The fact that experienced female MEPs and male MEPs behave alike in their substantive issue focus might indicate that female MEPs have been able to overcome gender stereotypes. But our results might suggest otherwise, that is to say: female MEPs have conformed to ways of doing politics in the EP to be able to advance their career in the EP.

***First draft - work in progress ***

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is often presented as one of the ‘success stories’ regarding gendered descriptive representation: the representation of female MEPs has grown from 15.2 percent (1979) to almost 40 percent in the latest European elections (2019). On this account, the EP surpasses almost all national parliaments (Norris 1997, Freedman 2002, Michon 2009, Kantola 2010, Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022) – with a few rare exceptions (e.g., Sweden, Belgium), often due to pro-active reforms from domestic authorities seeking to boost women’s representation in elected offices (e.g., electoral reforms introducing gender quotas). The so-called ‘EU exceptionalism’ is even more striking when considering the access of female MEPs to positions of influence in the supranational assembly: recent studies seem to confirm that the allocation of “mega seats” (e.g. Chair of committees as well as influential rapporteur ships) to women has been increasing, along with the growing delegation of female MEPs elected in the EP over the last 40 years (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022, Kopsch & Dodeigne 2022). In other words, even though the EP has not yet achieved a state of gender parity, an unmistakably gradual trend towards gender parity has been observed since 1979. Furthermore, the descriptive representation of women is not limited to elected offices, but it is also reflected in key positions of influence in the EP.

Yet, another line of research has shown that institutional practices and individual legislative behaviour are not random from a gender perspective (Kantola 2022). Beyond the EP’s “success story”, studies have observed that some division of legislative labour as well as allocations of top positions reflect a clear gendered pattern. Previous researchers have observed that female MEPs are systematically underrepresented in the attribution of certain influential committees, creating a divide between “hard” and “soft” politics between male and female MEPs (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022). These results raise questions about the ability of female MEPs to develop a ‘substantive’ representative agenda, beyond their mere presence in terms of ‘descriptive’ representation. This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by identifying and explaining gendered patterns in legislative behaviour, studying the use of 163.279 written parliamentary questions (WPQs) over 25 years (1994-2019). For that purpose, the paper relies on a content analysis of policy domains, used as a proxy for the substantive focus of MEPs’ parliamentary activity (see also de Vet & Devroe 2022). Based on automated imputation of policy dictionaries, our quantitative analysis determines the policy fields of WPQs and determine whether some gendered patterns are distinctively observed.

This contribution is structured as follows. Using analytical frameworks from the literature on national parliaments, we first develop hypotheses explaining why female MEPs would specialize in policy fields that are considered “hard versus soft policy domains” (Krook & O’Brien 2012), displaying a specific gendered pattern. Second, we present our methodology and research strategy for a quantitative content analysis, discussing the first empirical results based on descriptive statistics. Third, we test in multivariate models the moderating effects of political-institutional factors which suggest that the gendered patterns in MEPs’ behaviour can be explained by types of parliamentary procedures (priority questions), political contexts (issues and policy) as well as institutional distribution of power (strength and prestige of committees). Finally, we discuss the implications of our empirical results for the gendered functioning of the European Parliament and its broader impacts for legislative studies.

1. Gender patterns in MEPs' parliamentary activities and policy focus in the EP

There is by now a well-established scholarly tradition focusing on gendered patterns in parliamentary activity. These studies find that there are differences in how male and female members of parliament 'consider' and 'do' politics. While these gender differences may vary in size depending on the focus or context of the study, they nevertheless signal that gender structures the attitudes and behavior of MPs. Related to the attitudinal level, research shows that women hold different policy positions and tend to prioritize different issues than men (Lovenduski & Norris 2003; Wängnerud 2000). In particular, women seem to have a greater interest in, and feel a greater responsibility towards, issues that disproportionately affect women. These issues can relate to gender equality issues or feminist understandings of women's issues (Wängnerud 2000), but they may also relate to more traditional understandings of women's role in society (e.g., some studies find that women express greater interest in issues that are linked to children and family policy; Piscopo 2014).

Differences in policy preferences and priorities also sometimes translate into differences in parliamentary behavior. In parliamentary democracies, the most significant differences are found in early stages of the parliamentary decision-making process, and in types of behavior for which women and men MPs can act freely without party constraints. For example, in their study of Early Day Motions in the UK parliament, Childs & Withey (2004: 555) found that Labour women were more likely than Labour men to sign women's concern motions which "bear on women for either biological or social reasons", and especially so when they were of a feminist nature. Several studies also identify gender differences in parliamentary activities on social issues, including social welfare, education, work-family, and care issues (Atchison 2015; Catalano 2022). Wängnerud (2000), for instance, found gender differences in the extent to which Swedish politicians pursued gender equality policies and social welfare policies in their campaign work. Going beyond these initial differences, some recent studies report gender differences in women and men's parliamentary activities in relation to security, defense, trade policies and environmental policy (Sundström & McCright 2014; Ramstetter & Habersack 2020). Itzkovitch-Malka & Friedberg's (2018) analysis of private member bills and parliamentary questions in the Israeli Knesset documented that female MPs engaged less with national security issues compared to male MPs. Bäck, Debus & Müller (2014) found that female MPs gave fewer speeches in parliament than men when debates dealt with 'hard' policy domains such as macroeconomics, energy, transportation, banking/finance and space/science/technology. In order to explain why these gender differences appear, the extant scholarship usually refers to two distinct theories.

1.1 *The politics of presence*

A first set of studies links gender differences to the notion of a 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995). Women MPs' distinct priorities and activities in parliament compared to men are said to result from MPs' own gendered life experiences, identities, and social positioning. Catalano (2009: 56) for instance argues as follows: "Women MPs may see health care as a women's issue because of the traditional caretaking role of women, because nearly all women go to the hospital to have children, and because women take their children and others they care for to the

hospital.” Because women MPs share some descriptive characteristics with women in society, they are more likely than their male colleagues to pay attention to women’s interests, engage women in the representative process, and articulate issues that are important to women. The latter may also encourage women to sometimes pursue different policy specializations or become members of different parliamentary committees compared to men (Mateo Diaz 2005; Baekgaard & Kjaer 2012). If the politics of presence is not realized, this is seen as being the result of individual preferences of women and men (e.g. not all women may want to represent women’s issues, and some men might find it important as well; Celis & Erzeel 2015; Olofsdotter Sensota 2020); or institutional or party constraints that may dissuade women from ‘making a difference’ (Childs & Krook 2009; Phillips 1995).

1.2 Expectations, norms and gender roles

Yet, gender differences in parliamentary behavior do not only result from differences in priorities or experiences; they are also related to explicit or implicit understandings of which issues are ‘best’ addressed by men or women. A second set of studies, therefore, focuses on how patterns of parliamentary behavior are shaped by expectations and norms regarding gender roles (which may exist in the minds of parties, voters, and MPs themselves). Parliaments are gendered organizations operating according to distinct gendered rules, norms, and practices. Legislators who enter parliament (need to) adapt to these rules and ‘fit’ into the gendered logic of parliamentary organization (Erikson & Josefsson 2022). Moreover, this gendered logic is not specific to parliaments, but reflects and interacts with societal norms on what constitutes appropriate roles and behavior for men and women.

Hence, these studies refer to theories on gender stereotyping and gender role congruity to explain why women act on issues that are considered ‘feminine’ or ‘soft’ – because they receive strong incentives to display gender-conform behavior which aligns with ‘communal traits’ such as “a concern with the welfare of other people – for example, affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle” (Eagly & Karau 2002: 574). Men, on the other hand, are more often associated with ‘agentic’ traits such as a “assertive, controlling and confident tendency – for example, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader” (Eagly & Karau 2002: 574). These traits are seen as fitting with ‘hard’ and more prestigious policy domains.

Hence, while studies in the ‘politics of presence’-tradition focus more on women’s desire or willingness to advance women’s issues, theories of gender stereotyping and gender role congruity emphasize the element of coercion which may ‘force’ women (and men) MPs to behave in certain gender-conform and ‘gender appropriate’ ways. These studies also emphasize that women are not so much drawn to certain committees or parliamentary roles because they want to address certain topics, but rather the opposite: they are pushed by political parties or other gatekeepers towards policy domains or types of parliamentary behavior that conform to gender stereotypes. Women and men furthermore also internalize these norms and adapt their behavior accordingly. For example, Itzkovitch-Malka and Friedberg (2018:17) found in their study of the Knesset that while women were less likely than men to engage with national security issues, this was for both “involuntary” and “voluntary” reasons: “women were either pushed very far away from these cardinal issues by the male majority, who attempts to own

them, or make a strategic decision to avoid them, as they know they will have to fight the gendered stereotypes ruling this domain”.

1.3 A focus on the European Parliament: gendered patterns in MEPs behaviour of WPQs

Together, the above studies show that parliaments are indeed gendered institutions. However, many of these previous studies have focused on the national level of politics. As such, it remains unclear whether they also hold at the European level. Since the pioneer studies of Raunio (1996), Proksch and Slapin (2010) and Jensen et al. (2013), there has been a growing interest in the use and focus of (written) parliamentary questions by MEPs, even though it is still a relatively understudied topic (Brack and Costa, 2019). Explaining what MEPs do in the EP and how they tend to specialize in certain policy fields is a of direct interest for legislative scholars. Indeed, “the use of parliamentary questions may be considered an especially interesting indicator of how the elected understand their role as representatives” (Wilberg quoted in Raunio 1996). These roles are impacted by the broader opportunities structure in which legislators operate: the institutional and political settings explain differences between MEPs in terms of activity as well as policy specialization in the use of WQPs. The literature has identified the impact of the electoral system (Chiru, 2022; Sozzi, 2016a; Koop et al., 2018), government-opposition dynamics at the national (Proksch and Slapin, 2010; Jensen et al., 2013) and European levels (Kaniok and Kominkova, 2019), the size of EPGs (Navarro, 2019; Sozzi, 2016b; Sorace, 2018; Brack and Costa, 2019), the position towards European integration (Proksch and Slapin, 2010), and committee membership (Sozzi, 2021, Navarro, 2019). In addition, individual dimension such as the MEPs’ human and political background has been identified as a determining factor in legislative specialization (Sozzi, 2021). Surprisingly, the effects of other individual descriptive characteristics – such as gender and race that have been largely studied in national legislative assemblies (Höhmman, 2019) – is relatively missing in the study of MEPs’ parliamentary behaviour. In most studies on WPQs in the EP, gender is merely included as a control variable without proper theoretical framework to explain gendered patterns (e.g. gender is statistically significant in Sozzi’s result, but the reasons for this gendered pattern are not developed further. This what we seek to provide in this contribution.

Despite earlier cautiously positive accounts that the European Parliament (EP) might be more ‘gender-friendly’ than national politics, illustrated for instance by the sharp increase in women’s presence in the EP and the overall attention paid to gender equality as a norm, studies are less optimistic when it comes to gendered patterns of divisions of labor in the EP. The sharp increase in women’s political representation has not (yet) led to a rise in women occupying positions of power (Kopsch & Dodeigne 2022). Female MEPs remain underrepresented in the EP’s most powerful and prestigious committees (Beauvallet & Michon 2013). Women are also less likely to be appointed to political leadership positions, including EP presidents and European Party Group leaders or deputy leaders (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022). They are also less likely to be appointed as chairs or vice-chairs of committees, especially so when it concerns powerful or prestigious committees (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022). Moreover, Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger (2022) find that women as committee chairs are more often assigned to committees that can be defined as ‘feminine’ (or ‘soft’). Given that gendered divisions of labor seem to unfold in the EP, linking women to gender stereotypical types of

committees, we formulate in line with studies on national politics the following baseline hypothesis:

H1: Female MEPs ask fewer questions on “hard issues” and more questions on “soft issues” compared to male MEPs

2. The moderating effects of political-institutional factors

At the same time, we also expect that the size of the gender gap in issue focus in parliamentary questioning is not static. Under some conditions, the gap may be wide, but under other conditions it may close. The European Parliament has witnessed significant changes since the 1970s in terms of its institutional rules and power, its gender composition, and the overall context in which it operates. We expect that these political changes will have impacted the gender gaps in parliamentary behavior.

One important change is the increased presence of female MEPs over time, which has grown from 15.2 percent in 1979 to almost 40 percent in the latest European elections in 2019. Without assuming any direct or immediate effects that would hint at a ‘critical mass’ effect, there are indications that an increase in women’s presence beyond a token presence can change institutional rules and practices in a non-gender stereotypical way (Dahlerup 2006; Kanter 1977; Rudman & Phelan 2008). Moreover, it can create opportunities for *some* women to ‘make a difference’. Beckwith (2007) argues in this respect that numbers interact with newness in shaping the parliamentary behavior of women in gendered institutions (see also Childs 2004). Newness shapes the behaviour of newcomers (both men and women) who must learn the (gendered) institutional rules, practices, and norms, but it also shapes the behaviour of incumbents who have been socialized in these rules, practices and norms and respond to newcomers in particularly gendered ways. This means that newness is “characterized by a range of uncertainties and unpredictabilities: uncertainties among newly elected women about their capacity for legislative influence and uncertainties among incumbents about the (not yet) predictable (in party and parliamentary terms) behaviour of the newly elected” (Beckwith 2007: 43). As a result, newcomers – and newcomer women in particular – will receive incentives to ‘not act differently’, especially when they constitute a minority in their parliamentary party group or committee. However, once more women enter parliament, and the seniority of these women increases, more opportunities for ‘(gender) non-conforming’ behaviour occur. Hence, we expect that:

H2: Gender differences in issue focus (with female MEPs asking more questions on soft issues and fewer questions on hard issues compared to male MEPs) decrease over time

H3: Gender differences in issue focus (with female MEPs asking more questions on soft issues and fewer questions on hard issues compared to male MEPs) decrease with individual female MEPs’ seniority

Recent work on the gendered issue focus of MPs in national parliaments, moreover, considers the role played by institutional factors. Focusing on the Belgian case, De Vet & Devroe (2022) for instance identify differences in MPs’ issue focus between two types of parliamentary

questions: written questions and oral questions. Women MPs address ‘hard’ topics in an almost equal amount to men MPs in their WPQs but less so in their oral plenary questions. They explain this by the different constraints on these two types of parliamentary questions. Written questions are less subject to party control and are not limited in terms of how many questions an MP can ask, which means that they are less subject to intra-party competition among MPs. Hence, they conclude that when women have the autonomy to ask questions, and when party and institutional constraints are limited, gender differences remain mostly absent. When party control is stronger and when access to the floor is more restricted, gender differences are again wider, with men being more active in asking parliamentary questions on hard topics. The argument is that in situations when the institutional or partisan constraints increase, gender differences in issue focus increase, with female MEPs asking fewer questions on hard issues compared to male MEPs. Our focus on written (and not oral) questions in the European parliament does not allow us to test the exact same hypothesis as in De Vet & Devroe’s study (2022) at the European level, but we can nevertheless test whether the gender gap varies across different types of written questions. The European parliament allows MEPs to raise two types of written questions: priority questions and non-priority questions. Priority questions require a more immediate answer from the addressee, who must provide a written answer within three weeks. Opportunities for tabling priority questions are more limited, as each Member may only table one priority question each month. Non-priority questions, on the other hand, need to be answered within six weeks. There are fewer limitations to the number of questions an MEP can submit each month: a member can table up to twenty questions over a period of three months (Rules and Procedures of the European Parliament, February 2023, rule 138). Given the higher institutional constraints on priority questions, we hypothesize that:

H4: Gender differences in issue focus (with female MEPs asking more questions on soft issues and fewer questions on hard issues compared to male MEPs) are larger for priority questions.

The difference between priority and non-priority questions is to some extent linked to the salience of some issues, although both do not fully overlap. Salient topics will often include a degree of urgency, which can make them likely subjects for priority questions. However, they may also feature more prominently among non-priority questions, given that not every salient issue will be easy dealt with through priority questions only. Hence, we consider issue salience as distinct from question type in a second hypothesis. This hypothesis draws on earlier work on national parliaments. In her study of the US Senate, Swers (2007) shows that Democratic women increased their activity on the national security issues (a ‘hard’ topic) as a result of the salience of the issue in a post-9/11 world. The author finds that especially Democratic women experience difficulties with building a reputation on defense issues because “they must overcome the double bind of their association with the party that is perceived as weak on defense and the prevalence of gender stereotypes favoring male leadership on defense issues” (Swers 2007: 588). Yet, she also finds that Democratic women were very active in relation to homeland security issues and “engaged in compensatory strategies in which they utilize bill sponsorship of defense issues and their local campaign and constituency appearances with veterans and other groups associated with the military to counteract prevailing stereotypes

about women’s national security expertise”. Gender stereotypes may drive behavior of women in a gender-conform way, but women might also try to change prevailing stereotypes by increasing their activities on ‘hard’ issues, especially so in relation to issues that are deemed highly salient in a given political and societal context. We therefore hypothesize that:

H5: Gender differences in issue focus (with female MEPs asking more questions on soft issues and fewer questions on hard issues compared to male MEPs) are smaller for issues that are highly salient

A final factor is the prestige of committees. Given that most legislative work takes place in committees, committee assignment directly shapes MPs’ issue focus. However, not every committee is created equal, and some committees are more prestigious than others because of the topics they deal with, the allocated budget, or the opportunities for career advancement they offer. This has important consequences. Prestigious committees will be higher in status, and we can expect that high status will lead to more discriminatory behavior (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985). As a result, it has been demonstrated the so called “powerful” committees attract more male MEPs and support men’s vertical mobility in the institution, in comparison to “less powerful” committees (Yordonva 2009, Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022). In such committees we not only expect to find fewer women, but we also expect that gender stereotypes will be stronger and that gender differences in issue focus will be wider. The latter may be further reinforced by the fact that membership of these committees is more restricted and subject to party control, which will further increase gender differences in issue focus, with women MEPs asking more questions on soft issues and fewer questions on hard issues (see De Vet & Devroe 2022). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H6: Gender differences in issue focus (with female MEPs asking more questions on soft issues and fewer questions on hard issues compared to male MEPs) are larger in prestigious committees and hard policy related [Note: H6 is not tested in this version of the paper– May 2023]

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Dependent variable: the use of written parliamentary questions in the EP

Despite the rich variety in the forms of parliamentary questioning (Sanchez, Wiberg, 2011), parliamentary questions are available and used in all legislatures, which makes it an interesting scrutiny instrument to study. On this matter, Rozenberg and Martin (2011; see also Martin, 2011) argue that the analysis of parliamentary questions can be an interesting method to collect additional information on the preferences and behaviours of parliamentarians. Our contribution aims at assessing the impact of gender and institutional-political factors on the specialization of MEPs in certain policy domains. Parliamentary questions in the EP can serve several functions: it can be used to obtain information as well as to control the European Commission, the Council (Reunion, 1996) and more recently, the ECB. Other authors also highlighted the role of questions as a form of obstruction (Jensen et al., 2013) as well as a tool to promote

MEPs' reputation among relevant groups (i.e., constituency, interest groups, national party or the EPG) (Sozzi, 2016; Martin, 2011). Finally, parliamentary questions have also been described as a two-way information channel (Raunio 1996), as they can also be used to send information to the executive (Rozenberg and Martin 2011). The focus of this article is on *written* parliamentary questions (WPQs). This choice is explained by several reasons. First, WPQs are the most popular form of questioning in the EP. Their number has constantly been on the rise between 1979 and 2014, with a peak during the 2009-2014 legislative term (LT). In particular, for the period covered in this contribution, our comprehensive datasets cover 163.705 WPQs over the last five legislative terms: 13.100 WPQs during LT4, 18.723 WPQs during LT5, 30.292 WPQs during LT6, 55.742 WPQs during LT7 and finally, 45.852 WPQs during LT8. Second, as underlined by Navarro (2009, see also Brack and Costa, 2019), the procedure for WPQs in the EP is the most stable one (at least until 2014), and this allows to make comparison over time. Defined in Article 130 of the EP's Rules of Procedure, there exist two subtypes of written questions: non-priority (E) and priority (P) questions. While the number of priority questions is limited to one question per month per MEP, up until the 8th legislative term, there was no limit regarding the number of non-priority questions an MEP could ask¹. Moreover, in the case of priority questions, they shall be answered within a three-week period whereas non-priority questions shall be answered within six weeks. Overall, when compared to other parliamentary instruments available to MEP, *written* parliamentary questions offer several advantages. They are (1) accessible at the individual level and requires little effort or skills, (2) are relatively independent of control from the party leadership and (3) MEPs face few institutional constraints in their use (but see LT8).

3.2 Classification of hard, soft and neutral policy domains

The goal of this contribution is to determine which factors explain gender differences observed in WPQs related policy domains, if any. For that purpose, we have developed a two-steps procedure. First, we have associated each of the 163.709 WPQs to unique EU policy domains, using Winzen et al. (2022)'s analytical framework which covers 22 policy domains (see table 1 and figure 1). Second, we have labelled each of these 22 policy domains to "hard", "soft" and "neutral" policy areas (see table 2 and figure 2). Winzen et al.'s classification is highly congruent with typologies of policy domains used in other comparative projects (e.g., the Comparative Agenda Project). The main advantage is, however, that Winzen et al.'s classification has been specifically developed to cover European policy-making domains. At this stage of the project, the coding of the 22 policy domains is conducted via an automated imputation using an original dictionary identifying EU's policy areas in each WPQ. This automated imputation entails that most policy words associated with a given policy domain define the policy domain of the WPQ. This dictionary covers in total 9.117 words based on EuroVoc thesaurus (www.eurovoc.eu) and completed with existing policy dictionary (i.e.,

¹ Given the important increase in the number of questions asked, modifications were introduced in the EP's Rules of procedure for LT8 (Brack and Costa, 2019). More precisely, from July 2014 to December 2016, MEPs could ask as a maximum of five questions per month. This number changed again during the legislative term (EP's rule of procedure of December 2016) and fixed the limit to 20 questions over a period of three months (i.e., 80 per year).

mostly from the Comparative Agenda Project, but also from Garry & Laver 2009)². This approach has allowed us to identify at least one policy domain for 99.2 percent of all the 163.709 WPQs (1.364 WPQs cannot be classified based on our policy dictionary, see table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of 22 policy domains (1994-2019) by decreasing order of frequency

Policy Domains	Nb. of WPQs	Percentages
economic regulation	28.620	17,5
justice & rule of law	20.437	12,5
social affairs and employment	17.740	10,8
institutions	15.437	9,4
environment	13.009	7,9
justice and home affairs	9.075	5,5
transport	7.594	4,6
finance	7.553	4,6
agriculture	7.529	4,6
health	7.013	4,3
budget & taxes	4.416	2,7
research and technology	3.641	2,2
energy	3.584	2,2
education	3.179	1,9
culture & sport	2.938	1,8
trade	2.826	1,7
external relations	2.282	1,4
defence	1.593	1,0
religion	1.592	1,0
fisheries	1.339	0,8
consumer protection	838	0,5
enlargement and new member states	110	0,1
non-applicable	1.364	0,8
Total	163.709	100

Table 2 shows that most WPQs cover a unique policy domain (80.2 percent), while 13.0 percent include two policy domains and a very small minority of question (less than 6 percent cover between 3 and 11 policy domains). For the sake of parsimony, our empirical analysis currently focuses on WPQs with a unique policy domain (n=131.261, 80.2 percent), but we seek to cover WPQs with multidimensional policy domains at a later stage of the project. [*Note for the reader: the dictionary approach is a provisional step in our coding procedure. A team of trained coders are currently coding a sample of 3000 WPQs that will allow to develop supervised learning machine techniques to automatize the coding procedure of the broader set of WPQs]

Table 2. Nb. of policy domains by WPQs (1994-2019), by decreasing order of frequency

² Our goal is to offer a “ready-to-go” policy dictionary for the wider research community, including a full lemmatization of the policy vocabulary (n=13.693 words).

Policy domains	N	%
1 policy domain	131.261	80,2
2 policy domains	21.329	13,0
3-11 policy domains	9.755	6,0
No policy domain	1.364	0,8
Total	163.709	100

Once each WPQ is associated with a policy domain, we created our main dependent variable by establishing a categorical variable that labels each of 22 policy domains as “hard”, “soft” or “neutral/non-applicable”. Our categorization is built upon Krook and O’Brien (2012)’s analytical framework for the study of gendered patterns in parliamentary behaviour. This classification has been used by recent scholarship that has studied gendering of parliamentary questions in national contexts (see for instance De Vet & Devore 2022, Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger 2022). “Hard” policy domains include economic regulation, defence, transport, justice & home affairs, foreign affairs, domestic trade, external trade, justice & rule of law, research & technology, finance, agriculture and fishery (see table 3). Social policy & employment, health, education, culture & sports are coded as “soft” policy domains, while the remaining policy domains are coded as neutral (energy, environment, consumer protection, institutions, and enlargement).

Table 3. Classification of the 22 policy domains by strength of committees and hard/softs

	Hard policy domains	Soft policy domains	Neutral policy domains
Policy domains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture • Budget & Taxes • Defence • Economic regulation • External trade • Finance • Fishery • Foreign affairs • Justice & Rule of law • Justice and home affairs • Research & Industry • Transport • Trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture & Sports • Education • Health • Social policy & employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer protection • Energy • Enlargement • Environment • Institutions • Religion • N.A.

Figure 1. Distribution of policy domains in WPQs by gender (1994-2019)

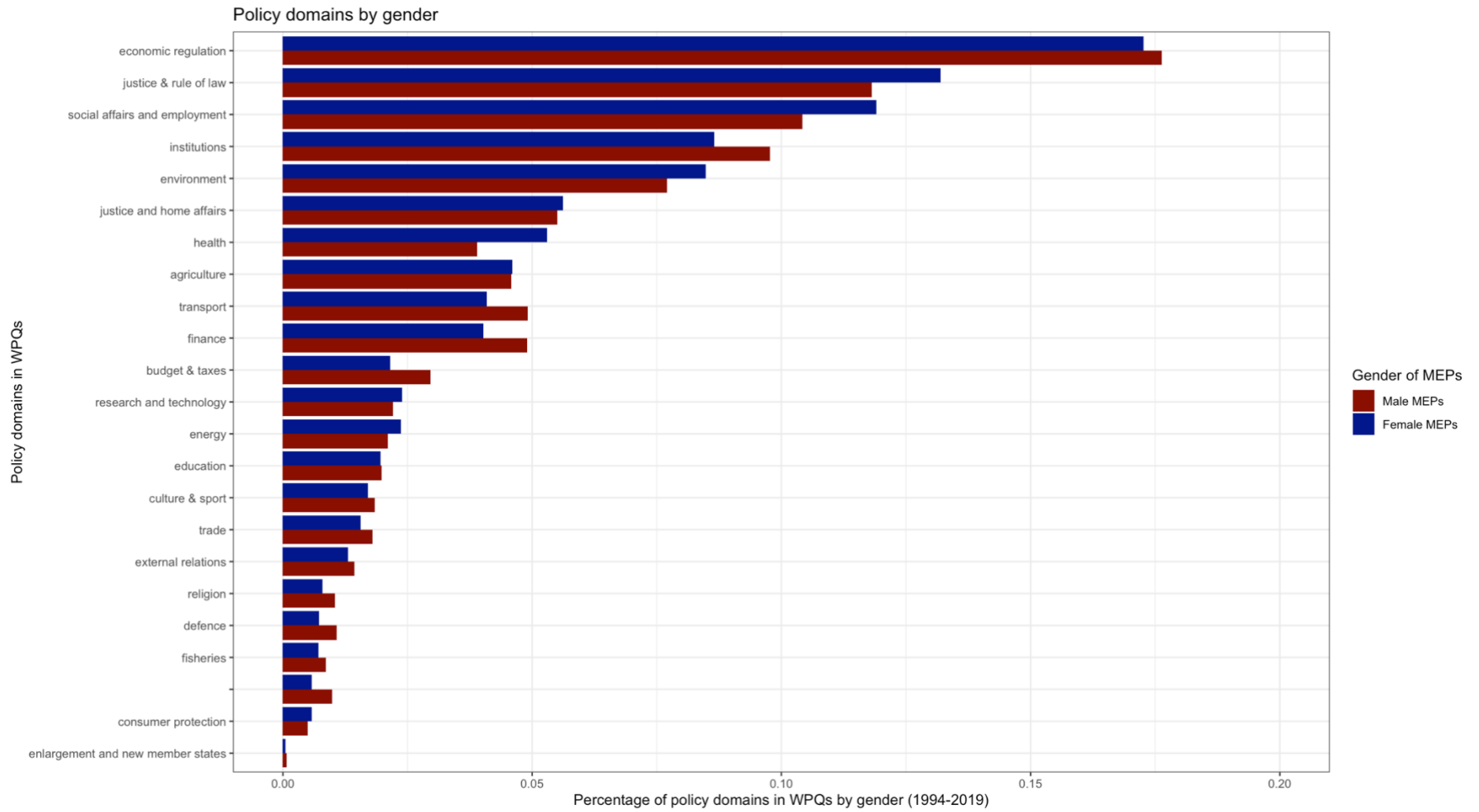
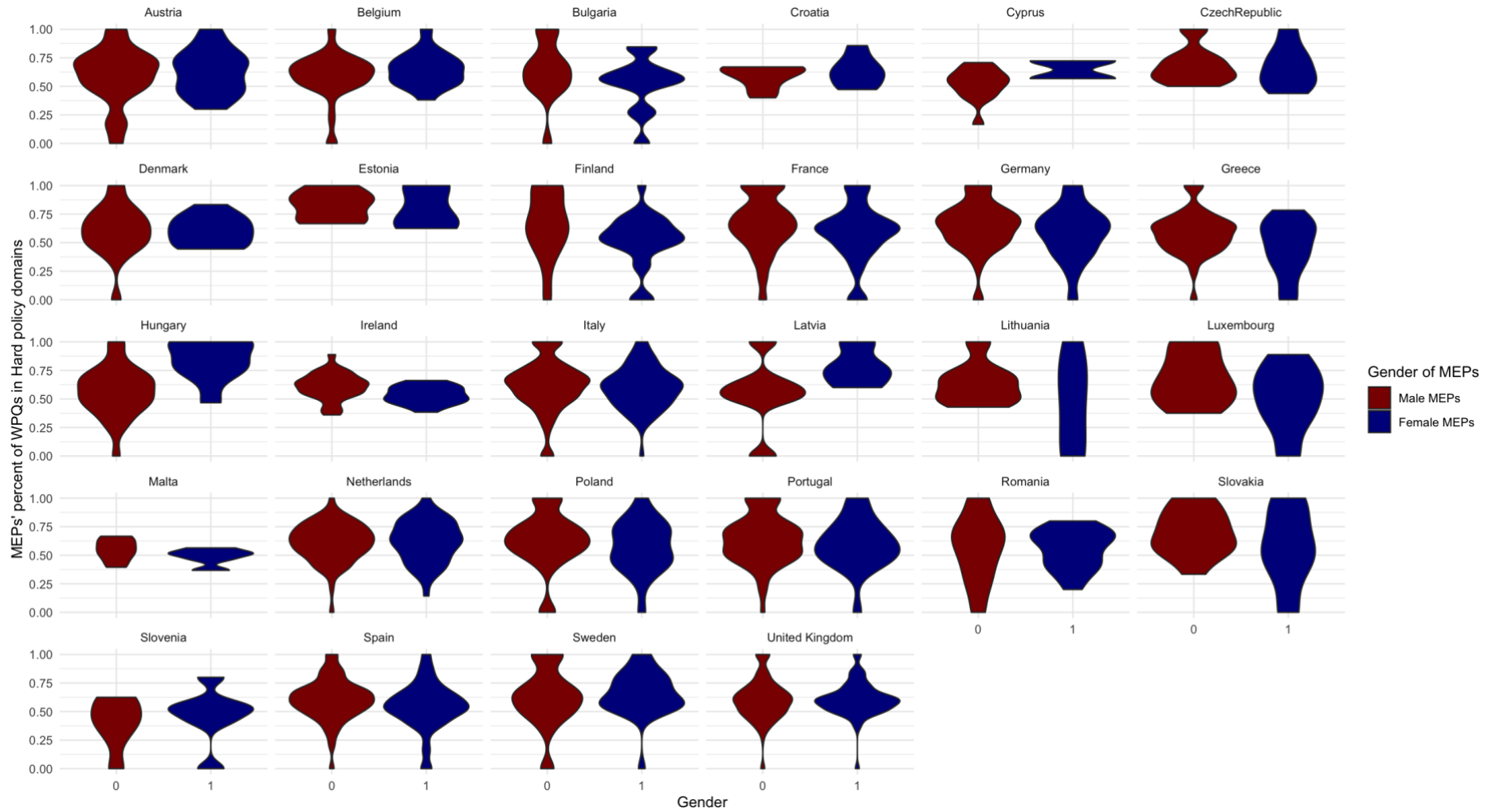


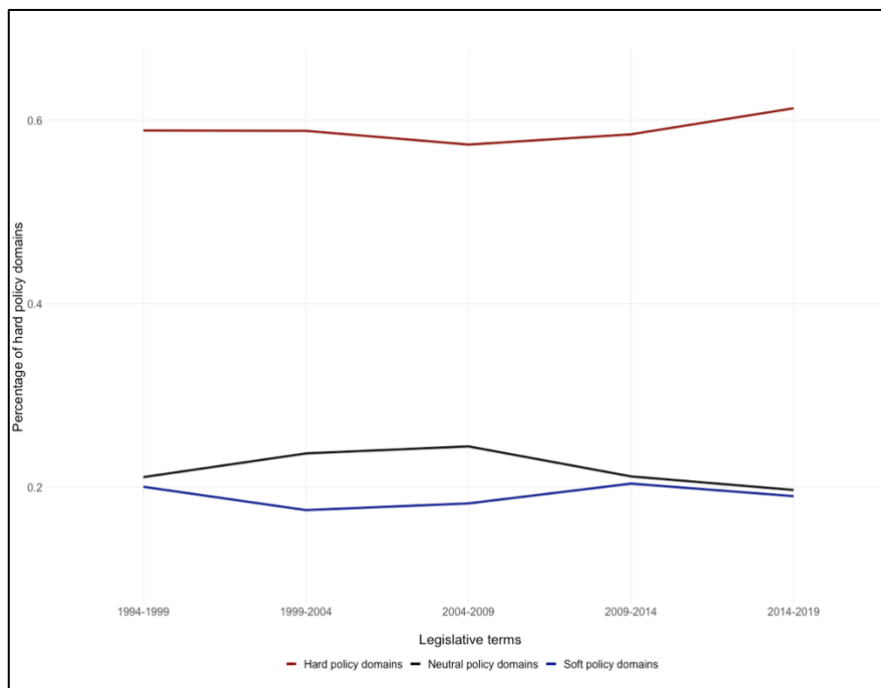
Figure 2. Distribution of hard policy domains in WPQs by gender and country (1994-2019)



4. A gendered use of parliamentary question in the EP?

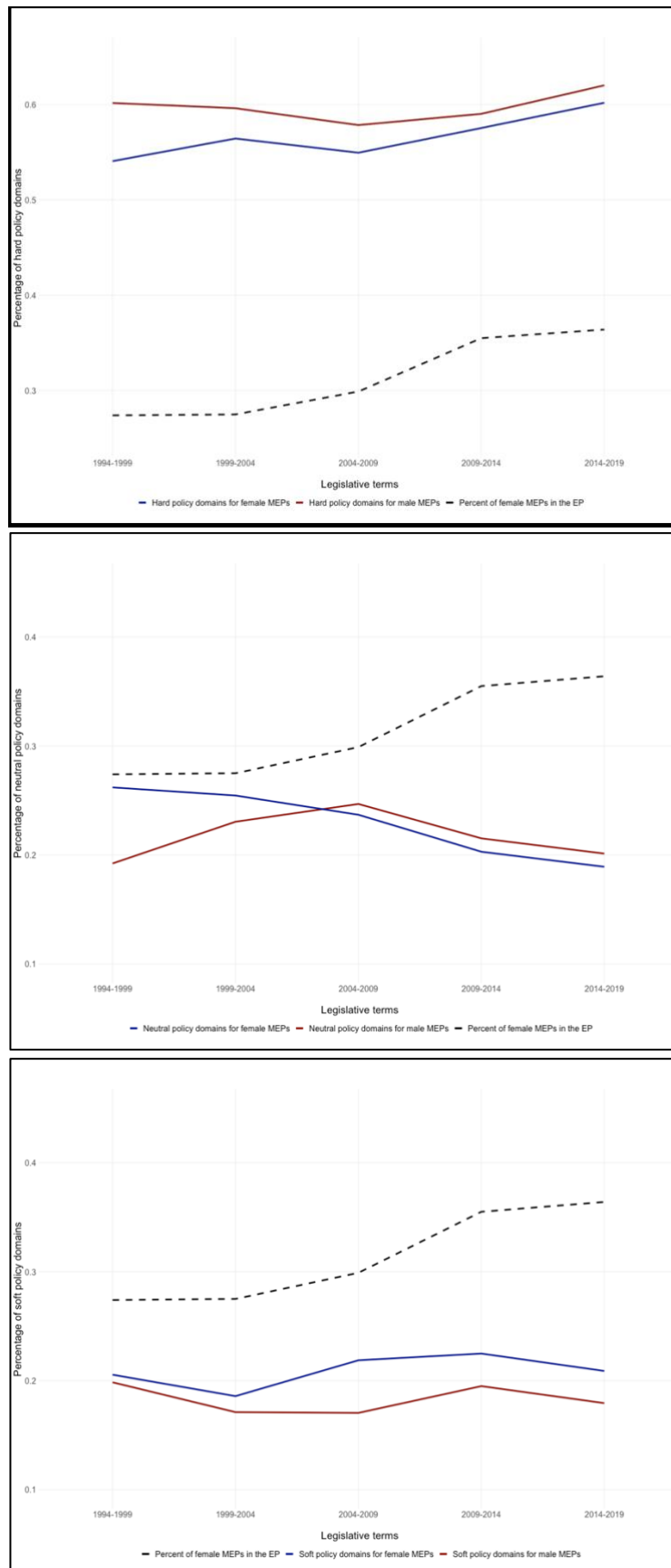
Figure 3 shows a relatively stable pattern of policy domains over time: while hard policy domains covered 58.6 percent of all the WPQs in the 4th legislative term, they have hardly increased to 61.4 percent in the 8th legislative term. Soft policy domains have always covered about one fifth of all WPQs, while we observe a slight decrease in the neutral category (from 22.2 to 19.3 percent). From a heuristic viewpoint, stability of policy domains over time permits to observe gender differences in similar contexts. Likewise, it must be noted there is no statistically significant difference in the quantitative use of WPQs between male and female MEPs: they ask on average respectively 72.8 and 69.3 WPQs (DF=1; F-Value=0.215; p=0.643).

Figure 3. Evolution of hard and soft policy domains in WPQs by legislative terms (1994-2019)



Overall, as already outlined in previous studies (Sorace 2018, Dodeigne et al., 2022), we do not observe gender difference in terms of the quantity of activity for the use of written parliamentary questions in the EP: male and female MEPs use the instrument in a similar proportion. What we want to do, in this contribution, is to assess whether there is a content difference in the policy areas of WPQs. On that matter, the empirical results show a distinct gender pattern in policy coverage, even though the conclusions are nuanced. At first glance, gender differences are overall limited if we consider the average based on the entire set of WPQs: male MEPs present a slightly higher percentage of WPQs on hard policies than female MEPs (respectively, 60.3 and 58.2 percent, a small difference that is statistically significant), with a corresponding slightly lower percentage of soft policy WPQs (respectively for male and female MEPs, 18.3 and 20.7 percent). The percentage of neutral questions is almost identical (respectively for male and female MEPs, 21.4 and 21.1 percent).

Figure 4. Evolution of “hard”, “soft”, and “neutral” policy domains in WPQs by gender (1994-2019)



However, there are some gender differences that have been evolving over time. Figure 4 shows the average percentage of hard, soft and neutral policy categories over time and by gender (1994-2019). It distinctively shows that the gender gap has been historically wider and that it has been closing only recently. During the 4th legislative term (1994-1999), WPQs with hard policy domains were a more predominantly ‘male’ parliamentary behaviour: male MEPs asked 61.2 percent, but only 54.7 percent for female MEPs (a difference of almost 7 points). Figure 4 clearly shows that these differences have increasingly eroded over time, with a gap limited to 1.5 points in the latest legislative term. Interestingly, the reduction of the gender gap in hard policy domain is not due to a shift in terms of policy focus over time. As observed in Figure 3, there has even been a slight increase in the number of WPQs focusing on hard policy domain over time. Over the 25 years covered, male MEPs have not asked less WPQs hard policy domains, they have even been slightly more active. In other words, what we observe is a structural evolution in which female MEPs have been increasingly active in hard policy areas (from 54.7 percent of their WPQs in the 4th legislative to 60.7 percent in the 8th legislative term). Nonetheless, our results show that gender differences have remained relatively stable for soft policy where female MEPs ask a higher ratio of their WPQs than their male colleagues in that policy sectors (respectively 20.2 and 18.2 percent in the latest legislative term). In fact, we observe that the gender gap is wider in the late 2000s and 2010s than what it used to be in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Finally, we have also assessed the frequency of policy domains according to the strength of parliamentary committees (to be tested for hypothesis 6). Following classification from the scholarship on the EP (Yordanova 2011; Chiru 2019), we have distinguished policy domains that are managed by “powerful committees” and “less powerful committees” (see. table 4). Because of institutional empowerment in the EP, strength of committees can vary over time though (e.g., JHA was a policy domain attached to a less powerful domain when instituted by the Maastricht treaty until 2004, before being discussed in a more powerful committee from 2004 and onwards). Unsurprisingly, we observe that powerful committees are predominantly associated with WPQs hard policy domains (81.3 percent of WPQs), while less powerful committees cover mostly mix of soft and neutral policy domains (respectively 56.1 and 45.0 percent of all WPQs). Yet, we do not find strong empirical evidence for our hypothesis 6 stating that gender differences should be stronger for policy domains attached to powerful committees. In fact, female MEPs ask slightly more WPQs in hard policy domains in areas covered by more powerful committees, in comparison to male MEPs (83.2 percent and 80.5 percent respectively). Overall, we can conclude from these descriptive stats that gender differences are observed in policy domains covered by WPQs (giving credit to H1), but the gap observed has been reducing substantially over time in hard policy domains, in which women have been increasingly active in their WPQs (supporting H2). Gender differences in soft policy domains are now wider than in the past though, even if they remain substantially limited (hardly 2 points of percentage). What is, therefore, certain is that female MEPs and male MEPs have been increasingly behaving alike regarding WPQ in related hard policy domains. On the opposite, we have no evidence of male becoming more active in soft policy domains. These descriptive stats tend, therefore, to reflect a gender pattern overall. We will now test these hypotheses in a systematic way controlling for other political and institutional factors, through multivariate models.

Table 4. Classification of the 22 policy domains by strength of committees and hard/softs

	Hard policy domains	Soft policy domains	Neutral policy domains
Powerful committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture (2009-2019) • Economic regulation • External trade (2009-2019) • JHA (2004-2019) • Justice & Rule of law • Research & Industry • Transport (1989-2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture & Sports (1994-2019) • Education (1994-2019) • Health • Social policy & employment (1989-2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer protection • Energy • Environment
Less powerful committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture (1979-2009) • Defence • External trade (1979-2009) • Finance • Fishery • Foreign affairs • JHA (1992-2004) • Transport (1979-1989) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture & Sports (1979-1994) • Education (1979-1994) • Social policy & employment (1979-1989; 2009-2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions • Enlargement • Religion

Table 5. Distribution of policy domains in WPQs by gender and types of committees (1994-2019)

		Hard	Soft	Neutral
<i>Areas related to more powerful committees</i>	All MEPs	81.3%	43.9%	55.0%
	Male MEPs	80.5%	44.4%	53.7%
	Female MEPs	83.2%	43.0%	58.3%
<i>Areas related to less powerful committees</i>	All MEPs	18.7%	56.1%	45.0%
	Male MEPs	19.5%	55.6%	46.3%
	Female MEPs	16.8%	57.0%	41.7%

5. Multivariate models

Multivariate models allow us to assess the gender effects ‘all other things being equal’, but also to develop interactive effects between gender and other factors as suggested by our hypotheses. For that goal, the empirical analysis is based on the combination of several original datasets (see table 4). First, we use our original dataset on WPQs (n=163.709 WPQs), specifying the policy domains, the target audience (Commission and Council) as well as the legislative procedure (priority and non-priority questions). Second, we have merged our dataset on WPQs with MEPs’ biographical information and career orientation from the “Evolv’EP project” (Dodeigne, Randour, Kopsch, 2022). The latter includes information on all 3,654 MEPs having served in the EP since 1979. We used empirical data regarding the duration (in months) of their parliamentary and governmental career at the domestic and European levels before, during (dual mandates) and after their EP mandates. We furthermore take into consideration human and political background in terms of age at 1st office in the EP, the seniority in the EP at the time WPQs are introduced, prior domestic experience as well as MEPs’ specialization in committees with hard/soft policy related policy (figure 5) as well as in (less) powerful committees. In addition, we control for variation across countries, EPGs and electoral systems. Regarding EPGs, we included a dummy variable for each EPG in order to test whether group affiliation is a relevant factor in shaping legislative behaviour as well as to see whether MEPs from Eurosceptic groups behave differently (i.e., Eurosceptic model of Proksch and Slapin, 2010). We also control for variation across Member states: on the one hand, we distinguish membership pre- and post-2004 enlargement; on the other hand, we include an index of gender parity by country (Public gender egalitarianism from Woo et al. 2022). Finally, we control for the impact of the electoral system used at European elections (COMPELDA by Däubler et al. 2022), as former literature has underlined the importance of electoral motivations in parliamentary behaviour (Sozzi 2016a, Navarro 2019, Hoyland et al. 2019, Chiru 2022, Koop et al. 2018).

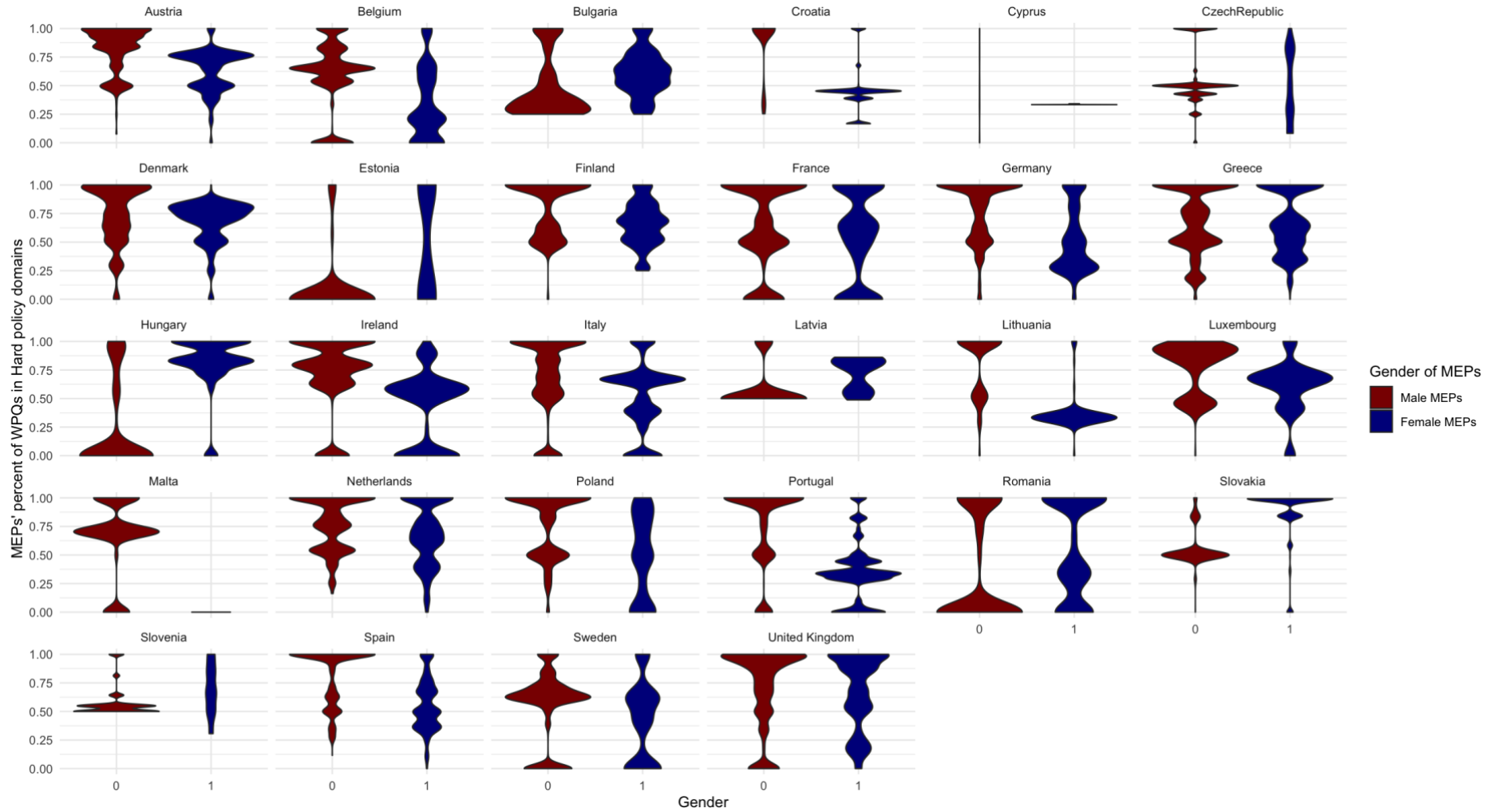
Our models present two types of dependent variables³. On the one hand, we fitted a linear mixed model to predict the percentage of hard WPQs introduced by MEPs. For this model, the unit of observation are the 2227 MEPs (Level-I) belonging to distinct EPGs and from 28 countries (Level-II) that have asked WPQs during the entire time of service. We also include this hierarchical structure into our models (specifying a level-II of observations for the 153 distinct EPG groups nested in countries, while considering the distinct legislative terms (from the 4th LT starting in 1994 to the 8th LT ending in 2019). On the other hand, we fitted a binomial mixed model to estimate factors determining that a WPQ is associated with a hard or a soft policy domain. For this model, the unit of observation are the 163.709 WPQs (Level-I) that asked by 2277 MEPs (Level-II) from 28 countries (Level-III) over 25 years. We take this hierarchical structure into account to specify our models. Because some WPQs present multiple authorship and some WPQs could not be classified, the number of WPQs is reduced to 124,078.

³ Note for the reader at Bamber workshop: a better specification of the logistic models is required though, using the DV as a categorical variable predicting ‘hard’, ‘soft’ and ‘neutral’ categories in multilevel multinomial regressions. Yet, such models require large computational power because of the 124.000 observations with random effects to be estimated for 2.262 MEPs from 28 countries. These models will be developed in another version of this contribution.

Table 6. Presentation and descriptive statistics for the independent variables

Independent variables	Operationalization	Descriptive stats
Written Parliament Questions (n=124.081)		
Targeted audience	Binary variable	116.992 Commission (ref.) 7.089 Council
Priority procedure	Binary variable	109.351 Non-priority WPQs(ref.) 14.730 Priority WPQs
Policy Domains	Binary variable	73.328 hard policy domains 23.889 soft policy domains
Individual MEP factors		
Gender	Binary variable	1579 male MEPs (ref.) 698 female MEPs
Age (1 st office in the EP)	Continuous variable (nb. of years, before log. Transf.)	Min-Max: 21-88, Mean: 47.9, std: 10.1
Seniority in the EP	Continuous variable (nb. of months, before log. Transf.).	Median: 59, Mean: 93.8, std: 64.4
Committee membership (related hard policy domains)	Continuous variable	MEPs' percentage of time of service (from 0 to 100 percent of the duration of the legislative term) in a committee with hard policy domains
Institutional and political factors		
EPGs	Categorical variable	Conservatives (ref) EPP Eurosceptics Greens/EFA GUE/NGL Liberals Technical Socialists
Electoral systems (COMEPELDA)	Categorical variable	Closed, Flexible, Open, STV)
Control variables		
Countries' public gender egalitarianism	Continuous variable	Median: 0.67, Mean: 0.65, std: 0.08, Min: 0.48, Max: 0.82
Size of national delegation	Continuous variable	
Legislative terms	Binary variable	Dummy for each legislative term in which MEPs served
EU Membership	Binary variable	Adhesion pre and post 2004-enlargement

Figure 5. Time served in hard policy domains committees by gender and country (1994-2019)



The first three models estimate the percentage of Hard policy domains asked by individual MEPs (see table 7 for the results). Model 1 is the full model while model 2 and model 3 include interactive terms to test H3 and H6 (by adding respectively an interaction between gender and seniority as well as between gender and type of committees). The models' total explanatory power is relatively weak (Marginal and conditional R-square below 0.10 for models 1, 2 and 3). Within these three models, the effect of gender is statistically significant and negative (beta = -0.02, $p = 0.002$). In other words, we observe that gender has a statistically significant effect on MEPs' parliamentary behaviour, verifying that female MEPs ask fewer questions on hard policy domains than male MEPs (H1). Furthermore, we observe that both MEPs' seniority and time of service in committees with related hard policy domains have a positive coefficient (albeit not significant for seniority). In line with H3, we observe that the coefficient for the interactive effects between gender and seniority is positive and significant: this indicates that women MEPs ask fewer hard policy questions, but that the difference with men MEPs decreases for more experienced women MEPs (see the marginal effects and predicted percentages on figures 6a & 7b). In other words, we observe that newly elected female MEPs tend to behave differently than their male colleagues (H3 verified). Figure 6a shows that female MEPs with a log. seniority lower than 4 (i.e., 55 months, about one legislative term) have a negative coefficient, indicating fewer WPQs in hard policy domains. Yet, experienced female MEPs present a coefficient with confidence intervals crossing the 0 dotted line (indicating absence of effects in comparison to male MEPs). Figure 6b presents a substantial interpretation by plotting predicted percentage of hard policy domains by gender and seniority. While male ask about the same percentage of such questions, irrespective of their seniority, we clearly observe that female MEPs have distinct behavior according to seniority. Finally, we also replicated the results distinguishing percentage in hard/soft policy domains that covered by more and less powerful committees (see table 4 above for the typology). Our results from models 5 and 7 are extremely consistent with model 2 establishing a clear gender effect (interacting with seniority) for hard and soft policy domains covered by less powerful committees. On the opposite, in the most powerful committees (models 4 and 6), we do not observe statistically significant effects (even though the sign of the coefficients goes in the expected direction). H6 is thus partly verified.

We now turn to the multilevel logit regressions, switching the unit of analysis from MEPs to WQPs: our goal is now to predict the hard and soft policy domains of each WPQ. First, the results of the multilevel logit regressions indicate that female MEPs ask fewer questions in hard policy domains – and more questions in soft policy domains – than male MEPs. Even though the effects are statistically significant and in the expected direction, the magnitude of the effects are nonetheless limited. That is to say, the predicted probability of a hard policy WPQ being asked by a male differ marginally differ from the predicted probability than by female MEPs (hardly a few points of percentages in the predicted probability). Likewise, these models confirm that committee specialization significantly enhance distinct parliamentary behavior. Furthermore, we could verify that certain WPQs' characteristics procedures (priority questions) and targeted audience (Commission versus Council) impact the policy domain (soft policy domains are more likely to be found in non-priority questions to the commission while hard policy domains are more frequent for priority questions to the Council). However, the interactive effects are not significant which indicate that there are no enhancing effects of the gender impact observed according to institutional and political factors.

Table 7. Multilevel linear regression of percentage of hard & soft policy domains in WPQs introduced by MEPs

	% of Hard Policy	% of Hard Policy	% of Hard Policy	% of Hard policy More Powerful committees	% of Hard policy Less Powerful committees	% of Soft policy More Powerful committees	% of Soft policy Less Powerful committees
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Women MEPs	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.18*** (0.06)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.19** (0.08)	0.05 (0.05)	0.13** (0.07)
MEPs' Seniority (log. of months served)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.002 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.005 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Time served in hard policy committees	0.09*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.14*** (0.02)
Gender * Seniority		0.04*** (0.01)		0.02 (0.02)	0.04** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.02)
Gender * Time in hard policy committees			-0.02 (0.03)				
MEPs' age	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.004 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)
EPGs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Public gender egalitarianism index	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Electoral Systems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Size of national delegation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Legislative terms	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	0.62*** (0.09)	0.66*** (0.09)	0.62*** (0.09)	0.71*** (0.13)	0.30* (0.16)	0.13 (0.09)	0.50*** (0.14)
Observations level I (MEPs)	2,262	2,262	2,262	2,262	2,262	2,262	2,262
Observations level II (EPGs nested in Countries)	157	157	157	157	157	157	157
Log Likelihood	281.20	284.93	281.41	-95.89	-384.25	714.82	11.32
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-516.40	-521.86	-514.82	247.78	824.50	-1,373.64	33.36
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	-384.75	-384.49	-377.45	408.05	984.77	-1,213.37	193.63

Figure 6a. Marginal effects of hard policy domains by gender and seniority (Model 2 – Table 7)

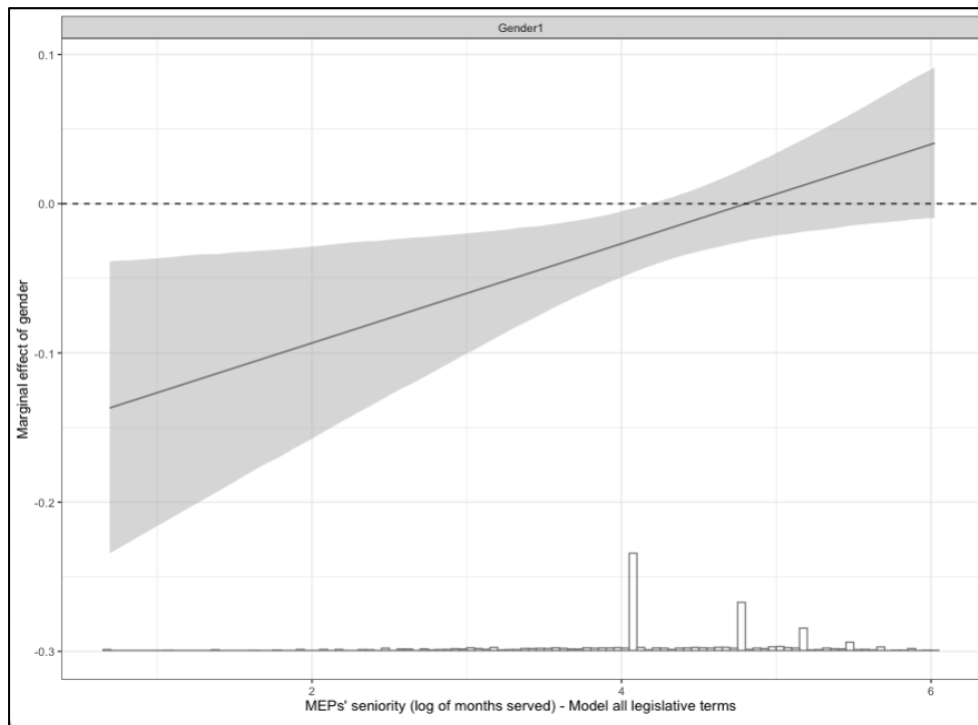
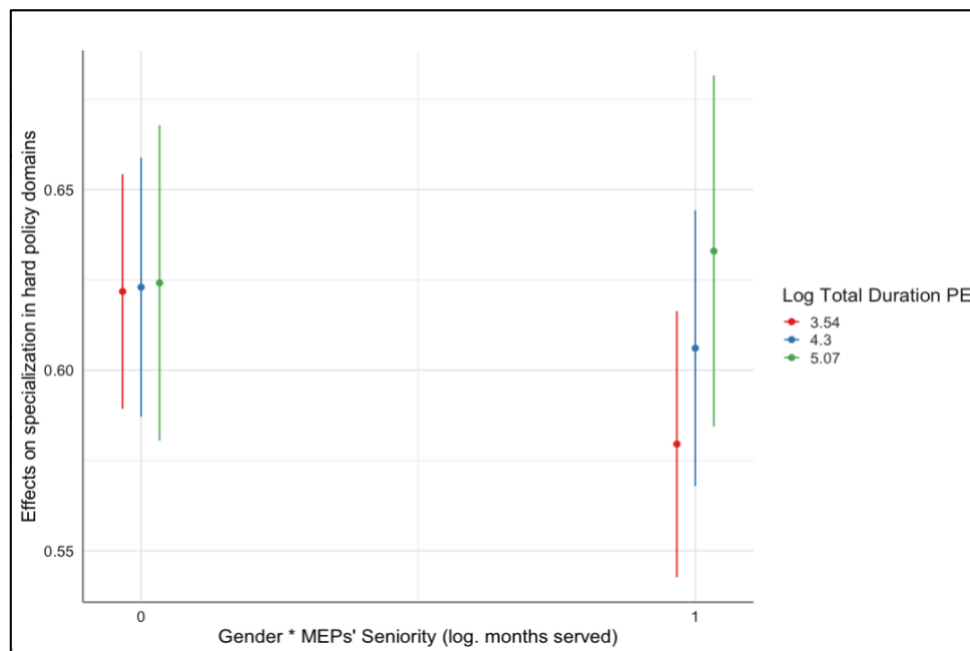


Figure 6b. Predicted percentages of hard policy domains by gender and seniority (Model 2 – Table 7)



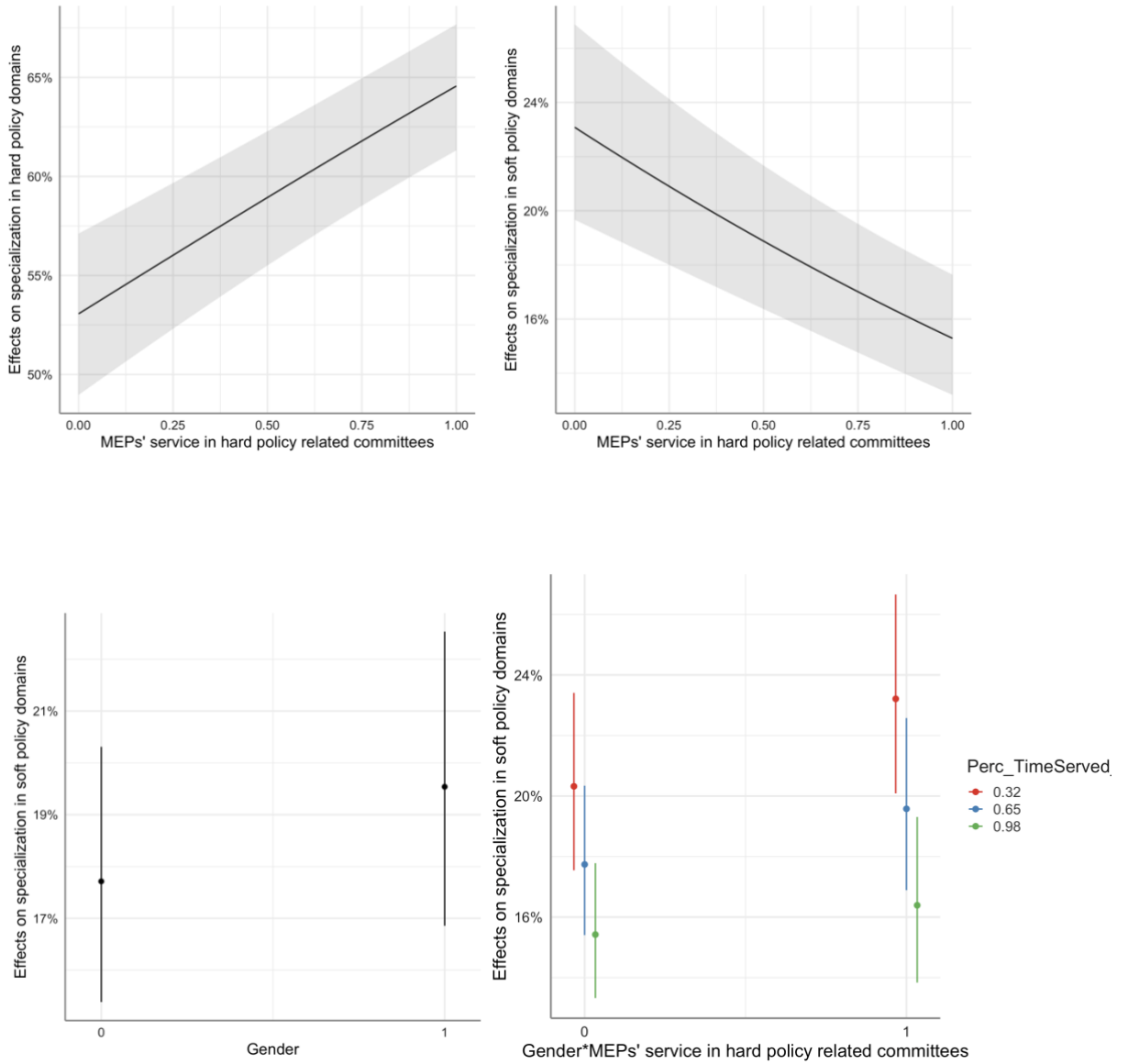
Log. of months	Duration in Months	Duration in Terms
3,54	34,47	0,58
4,3	73,70	1,25
5,07	159,17	2,70

Table 8. Multilevel logit regression of hard & soft policy domains by WPQs

	WPQs being hard policy domain	WPQs being soft policy domain
	Model 1	Model 2
Women MEPs	-0.03 (0.07)	0.24 ^{***} (0.09)
MEPs' Seniority (log. of months served during that term)	-0.0000 (0.0003)	0.0003 (0.0004)
Time served in hard policy committees (% of committee service during that term)	0.48 ^{***} (0.06)	-0.51 ^{***} (0.07)
Procedure (ref. non-priority)	0.12 ^{***} (0.02)	-0.27 ^{***} (0.03)
Gender * Seniority	0.0002 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)
Gender * Time served in hard policy committees	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.15 (0.12)
Gender * Procedure	-0.05 (0.04)	0.06 (0.06)
Targeted audience (ref. Commission)	0.14 ^{***} (0.03)	-0.41 ^{***} (0.04)
EPGs	✓	✓
Public gender egalitarianism index	✓	✓
Electoral Systems	✓	✓
EU Membership	✓	✓
Legislative terms	✓	✓
Constant	0.02 (0.25)	-1.09 ^{***} (0.30)
Observations level I (WPQs)	124,078	124,078
Observations level II (MEPs)	2,262	2,262
Observations level III (Countries)	28	28
Log Likelihood	281.20	284.93
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-516.40	-521.86
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	-384.75	-384.49

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Figure 7. Predicted percentages of policy domains by gender and seniority (Models 1 and 2 – Table 8)



6. Discussion

Overall, our empirical analyses show that gender differences are unmistakably observed in the MEPs' behaviour. Yet, those differences remain limited in terms of magnitude (merely a few points of percentage different), and they have been reducing over time. This decrease seems to be mostly due to the growing presence of more experienced female MEPs over time in the EP. The more experienced female MEPs show virtually no difference in hard policy domains, contrary to newly elected female MEPs who tend to focus more on soft policy issues. However, our results do not indicate that gendered patterns are absent in MEPs parliamentary behaviour, on the contrary. First, the fact that experienced female MEPs and male MEPs behave alike in their substantive issue focus might indicate that female MEPs have been able to overcome gender stereotypes and/or have conformed to ways of doing politics in the EP to be able to advance their career in the EP. Second, soft policy domains unmistakably remain policy-making areas that are overlooked by male MEPs. And contrary to time evolution for hard policy domains, our results do not observe time evolutions (the gender gap is slightly wider in the 2010s than it used to be in the 1990s and 2000s). Finally, our empirical results hide further gendered patterns: in line with previous studies (Sozzi 2021), our models indicate that committee specialization is a clear driver of parliamentary behaviour. That is to say, MEPs' time of service in hard-related policy domains strongly predict their specialization in WPQs in hard-related policy domains (and vice-and-versa for soft policy domains). In this respect, we have observed that male MEPs from most members states are prioritized in those committees with related hard policy domains, with hardly few exceptions across the 28 countries. In conclusion, our first results indicate that gendered parliamentary behaviour in the EP are present, albeit limited in magnitude. Furthermore, MEPs' behaviour reflects complex phenomena which require to unpack temporal evolutions as well as moderating and enhancing effect of other institutional and political factors. Our goal is to study deeper these complex transformations in the next version of version of our contribution.

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Appendix.

Table A2. Distribution of hard and soft policy domains by legislative terms

	Hard		Soft		Neutral / N.A.		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
LT4	7.672	58,6	2.516	19,2	2.912	22,2	13.100
LT5	11.015	58,8	3.239	17,3	4.469	23,9	18.723
LT6	17.355	57,3	5.409	17,9	7.528	24,9	30.292
LT7	32.729	58,7	11.116	19,9	11.897	21,3	55.742
LT8	28.134	61,4	8.590	18,7	9.128	19,9	45.852

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