Evidence Bite - Contested equality: the gendered dynamics of unpolitics in the European Parliament

This article by CCINDLE partners Johanna Kantola and Valentine Berthet, and their colleague Barbara Gaweda, discusses how radical right populist actors in the European Parliament reshape debates on gender equality via 'unpolitics' (or the obstruction and disruption of democratic processes). The European Parliament is often seen as a strong defender of gender equality, with a formal commitment to it, yet this value is increasingly contested within the institution as radical right and anti-gender actors have gained political power. The article outlines how unpolitics tactics and strategies unsettle equality politics in the European Parliament by influencing debates, practices, policy outcomes and affective atmosphere, rather than openly opposing the norm. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

The **key observations** of the article include that:

1. Anti-gender politics frequently operates indirectly

Instead of explicitly rejecting gender equality, anti-gender actors often favour tactics of unpolitics. These include the depoliticising or ridiculing of gender issues (framing them as irrelevant or arcane), the cloaking of anti-gender animus within concerns around immigration or family rights, and the coarsening of the institutional atmosphere through antagonistic interventions. These strategies make their agendas harder to identify and challenge, while gender equality efforts are continuously undermined.

2. Attacks occur across multiple dimensions

The study shows that gender equality is contested in four interconnected areas, namely discourses (challenging or reframing what gender equality means), policies (limiting the ambitions or scope of equality measures), practices (altering how decisions are made and who participates), and affective atmospheres (creating polarised or hostile environments).

Anti-gender actors realise that anti-gender politics is not just about policy, but about how institutions function in practice.

3. Contemporary anti-gender politics has deep historical roots

Despite these challenges, feminist actors within the European Parliament have found ways to defend gender equality norms and policies, build alliances across political groups, and use institutional tools to counter anti-gender influence. The Parliament remains a site of ongoing struggle, where equality is neither fully secured nor entirely dismantled.

The **key takeaway messages** of the article include that:

- **Opposition is not always overt:** Indirect tactics may be just as impactful as explicit campaigning in shaping political outcomes.
- **Institutions matter:** Changes in discourse, procedures, and everyday practices can cumulatively reshape democratic norms.

Evidence Bite - Contested equality: the gendered dynamics of unpolitics in the European Parliament

- **Resistance is ongoing and vital:** Feminist actors play a crucial role maintaining and advancing gender equality in contested institutions.

The study shows that gender equality in the European Parliament is not straightforwardly advancing or declining, but rather being continuously reshaped through subtle struggles over meaning, practice, and power. Unpolitics allows anti-gender actors to weaken equality without openly opposing it, shrouding their agendas from public view. Meanwhile, feminist resistance ensures that institutions remain key arenas for defending democracy. Recognising these strategies and hidden conflicts is essential for protecting gender equality and ensuring that democratic processes remain inclusive. Read the article in full here for further details.

For more information on the CCINDLE project, as well as publications, evidence bites, podcasts, videos and more, please visit our website: https://ccindle.org

Email: ccindle.info@ru.nl

Funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union under grant No 101061256. UK consortium partners are funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee [grant numbers 10051932 and 10048433]. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency or UKRI. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.
This evidence bite used ChatGPT 5.4 to generate an initial summary of the featured article.