Evidence Bite: From gender equality champion to anti-gender battleground? The European Parliament and the contestation of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity

This article by Petra Ahrens and CCINDLE partner Petra Meier explores how the European Parliament's long-standing role as a promoter of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusion is being challenged by the growth of anti-gender politics, and what makes the institution vulnerable to these challenges. The European Parliament (EP) has often been portrayed as a champion of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights, but this position cannot be taken for granted. The authors examine how the growing presence of anti-gender and anti-equality positions is changing the political environment inside the Parliament. The article notes that the EP's vulnerability is not simply about whether more openly anti-gender MEPs are elected, it is about how institutional structures, political practices, and existing inequalities create opportunities for equality commitments to be weakened from within. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

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

1. The European Parliament's reputation as an equality champion can obscure its vulnerabilities

The EP has played an important role in advancing gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, but this record does not mean that equality is securely embedded. The institution incorporates competing political projects, and alongside actors committed to equality are political forces challenging feminism, gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. The Parliament should therefore be understood not as a unified 'equality actor' but as a political arena characterised by contestation. Thus the EP's gender-equality achievements coexist with unequal distributions of power and influence.

2. Anti-gender politics exploit existing institutional and political vulnerabilities

Anti-gender actors do not necessarily need to confront equality policies directly. They can challenge them by questioning their legitimacy, reframing their meaning, or contesting the political priorities behind them. The article draws attention to vulnerabilities created by factors including the growing presence and influence of radical-right and anti-gender actors, political polarisation around gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, institutional practices that can marginalise equality concerns, and the tensions between formal commitments to equality and their implementation in practice. Crucially, formal equality commitments do not automatically guarantee substantive equality.

3. Feminist and pro-equality politics depends on power and alliances

The future of gender equality in the EP depends on more than having supportive policies, it requires those who have power to shape political agendas and build effective coalitions. Feminist actors have historically achieved important advances through cooperation across political groups and with civil society organisations. This kind of collective action and coalition-building can provide an important counterweight to actors seeking to weaken equality, but such alliances are neither automatic nor permanent.

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Maintaining them requires political organisation, institutional commitment, and ongoing mobilisation.

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

- **Equality should not be taken for granted**: A strong historical record on gender equality does not make an institution immune to anti-gender politics.
- **Formal rights are not enough**: Equality can be weakened through patchy implementation, political priorities, and institutional practices even when formal commitments remain in place.
- **Power and alliances matter**: Feminist and pro-equality actors need sustained coalitions capable of defending equality within contested political institutions like the EP.

The European Parliament remains an important site of struggle over the meaning and future of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. The key lesson is that democratic and equality gains are not irreversible, and that institutions celebrated as equality champions can become battlegrounds when political power shifts. For activists and policymakers, the article points towards the importance of looking beyond formal commitments to examine who has real influence, how institutions operate, and whether pro-equality coalitions remain strong enough to defend existing gains and push them further. The EP's history demonstrates that progress is possible, but its continuation requires active political defence. You can read the article in full here.

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