



**GENDER AND POLITICS**

*SERIES EDITORS: JOHANNA KANTOLA · SARAH CHILDS*

# Gendering the Everyday in the UK House of Commons

## Beneath the Spectacle



Cherry M. Miller

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# Gender and Politics

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ISSN 2662-5814

Gender and Politics

ISBN 978-3-030-64238-9

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64239-6>

ISSN 2662-5822 (electronic)

ISBN 978-3-030-64239-6 (eBook)

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*For my Mum, Sue and Sister, Emma*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have happened without the participants, including the MP and her office who very generously provided the setting to conduct the research from and who provided support during the field work. I am thankful to all of the participants of the study who were generous with their time and insights and I take full responsibility for the representation in this study. The study provides one lens to make sense of gendered power relations in the UK House of Commons, and I only offer a partial account, which makes the need for more research all the more pressing.

The book could not have happened without Peter Kerr and Stephen Bates at POLSIS University of Birmingham, who supervised the original research. I am also grateful to the examiners of this work: Fiona Mackay and Nicki Smith. I would like to thank the EUGENDEM team for friendship and intellectual stimulation Johanna Kantola, Anna Elomaki, Petra Ahrens, Barbara Gawenda and Valentine Berthet and my colleagues at Gender Studies Tampere. The ECPG conference in 2019 was my first ECPG. It was a supportive environment and it was a privilege to present some of the work for this book on Josefina Erikson and Tania Verge's panel on studying parliaments as gendered workplaces. Thankyou to the Uppsala Gender and Politics crowd for welcoming me in November 2019 to reflect on the ethnographic work undertaken in both the UK House of Commons and European Parliament.

I am thankful to the Gender and Politics Series editors, Sarah Childs and Johanna Kantola, for their assistance and support. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their very helpful and constructive comments. I would also like to thank Ambra Finotello and her team at Palgrave for their help and patience in the publication process.

I am lucky to have had productive and critical discussions with numerous colleagues, from POLSIS at the University of Birmingham and Gender Studies at Tampere University. This includes, not least Raisa Jurva, Nataša Mojskerc, Tuula Juvonen, and the whole Tampere ‘Shut up and Write’ gang.

The book was supported by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council as a 1+3 Ph.D. It then received funding from the European Research Council Horizon 2020 Programme, grant number 771676, to enable me to write this up and extend the research further in the exciting context of The European Parliament.

I really couldn’t ask for better or more supportive friends throughout this research—in Tampere, Birmingham, Folkestone, and beyond. These friendly faces include: Will, H, Remant, Georgie and Dan, Georgina, Ollie, Sarah, Shane, Martien, Emma C, Leanne, Nigel, Pete, Lorelai, Bear, Chrissie, and the Tampere Park Run crew. To my dear friend T—whom I have had the immense privilege of sharing the highs and lows of politics with—thanks a million!

The book could not have been written without the support of my family in Kent: Auntie Jane, Adam, Chris, Tom, Steph and of course Millie—who brings us so much joy! And also from my Dad’s side of the family, who it is such a privilege to get to know more: Karen, Trevor, Sadie and Gary. A special mention goes to my Dad who sadly never knew of my achievements in relation to this research. (Memories of) his cheery laughter down the phone have carried me very far. I am also grateful to my Nan, Heather, who was a formidable woman and someone who I miss dearly.

Finally, to Mum and Emma, to whom this book is dedicated, thanks forever and always.



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DCCS	Department for Chamber and Committee Services
DFE	Department for Facilities
DIS	Department for Information Services
FDI	Feminist Discursive Institutionalism
IPSA	Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority
PAd	Political Advisor, Main Opposition
ParliABLE	ParliABLE is a Workplace Equality Network (WEN) in support of disabled Members and Peers, their staff, staff of both Houses, and others who work on the Parliamentary Estate
ParliGENDER	ParliGENDER is the Workplace Equality Network for Gender in Parliament
ParliON	ParliON is the Parliament Opportunity Network, a Workplace Equality Network to promote inclusion and equality of opportunity across Parliament, and to raise awareness of issues around socio-economic inclusion
ParliOUT	ParliOUT is the Workplace Equality Network for LGBTIQ people in parliament
ParliREACH	ParliREACH is a Workplace Equality Network established to increase awareness and appreciation of race, ethnicity and cultural heritage issues in Parliament
SpAd	Special Advisor
WEN	Workplace Equality Network

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# Introduction: Gendering the Everyday in the UK House of Commons—Beneath the Spectacle

It's Easter recess and the Member had left her jacket in the cloakroom. She calls the office very apologetically, asking her researcher, exceptionally, if she could get it, not normally asking for such tasks. We walk through an airy Portcullis House and into the darker Palace. We inquire to a member of the House Service about the jacket as a male middle-aged MP swaggers past confidently and interrupts us by asking: 'Have you come to hang your swords on the pink ribbons'? We both uttered an awkward laugh, completely unimpressed.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 BENEATH THE SPECTACLE

The voices above in the vignette and of those interspersed throughout the book: of MPs, members of the House Service, parliamentary researchers, and extra-parliamentary actors, indicate that gender works through embodied interactions and subjectivities everyday in workplaces. This means that how actors think, feel and are empowered to act around others matters for the organisation and outcomes of gender in parliamentary spaces. Bodies in the UK House of Commons do not move equally throughout the space. Some bodies are repeatedly subject to prohibition and affirmation and this interacts with categories of gender. Furthermore, the social and more informal spaces of the UK House of Commons are

not immune from workings of power and gender does much ‘work’ in constructing these spaces.

For the very first time, this book brings theoretical literatures to develop a ‘fleshed out’ version of feminist discursive institutionalism, the least developed (Kantola and Lombardo 2017) of the feminist institutionalism strands. It does so by bringing together the gender theory of Judith Butler; literatures on the everyday; and methodological literatures on parliamentary ethnography into a productive exchange, to explore the ‘work’ that gender does everyday in the UK House of Commons. It is based on an extensive fieldwork conducted in the UK House of Commons at the end of the 2010–2015 parliament.

The book provides a newly developed optics of parliaments and treats them as *workplaces*—empirically demonstrating the relationality of gender between actors from different working worlds. To this end, the book provides a textured account of gender, that brings discussions of identity and performance to bear on a range of workplace practices. Examples of such practices include recruitment, rotation, advice-giving, the social spaces of the workplace, everyday resistances and open struggles to gender equality, performing public service, and the endogenisation of democratic innovations into the everyday of the UK House of Commons.

Gender and politics scholars are increasingly making appeals to ethnography. This is because parliamentary ethnography not only helps us to study informal practices, but also avoids the risk of over-generalising agency. Ethnography provides the tools to investigate agency empirically as subject-contingent. To conceptualise agency as subject-contingent means that different types of agency may be graspable to certain actors, depending on their institutional location, reputation, identity, subjectivity and resources. Rather than universal theories of ‘male domination’, this book, uses parliamentary ethnography to conceptualise and empirically focus on gender as in struggle. Like others (Mackay 2008; Ahmed 2012, p. 8), the book shares a desire to thicken our descriptions and analyses of inequality and institutions. Moreover, ethnography avoids the risk that taking an everyday approach could be hagiographical, rather than political—that is, treating the everyday as something to be valorised as a space of agency, without paying attention to structural inequalities (McNay 1996). Feminist institutionalists have been interested in informal practices and institutions (Krook and Mackay 2011; Kenny 2013, 2014; Kenny and Bjarnegard 2015). Hence, it would be useful to bring these two approaches together. Using feminist discursive institutionalism, the book



explores more closely the interaction with institutional rules and struggles, to show heterogeneity, agency and contradictions in the reproduction of gender. Furthermore, using a feminist discursive institutionalist approach accepts that change may be subject-contingent and the book provides five entry points for change in Chapter 8, derived from a model of the various ways in which gender is institutionally reproduced and resisted in Chapter 2.

Taking insights from anthropology seriously, the book knits together a series of *emic* and *etic* insights to explore everyday gendering in the UK House of Commons. *Emic* means interpretations from parliamentary actors. *Etic* means ‘outside’ interpretations, sometimes informed by theory or other logics. Indeed, at a greater distance from political exigencies of the setting, *etic* interpretations can propose much too. The vignette indicates that in order to understand the reproduction of gender, we need a different optics to capture different angles, interfaces, interstices and environments. Furthermore, if gender is something that is repeated over time, then ethnography is an appropriate methodology to use.

The book argues that in order to understand everyday capillary workings of power, we need to speak with differently situated actors, accepting that parliaments are not unified and there are different gender regimes and identities at play. Whilst there is much to commend in existing sophisticated research on gender and parliaments, there is a problematic tendency to treat elected MPs as the presumptive centre of analysis. This has the effect of foreclosing other actors such as parliamentary researchers, advisors, clerks and bar workers—who are rendered ‘not to matter’ in this analytical focus but who provide crucial insights. Parliamentary ethnography de-naturalises this residual status. Nader urged anthropologists to study ‘sideways’ and ‘down’ as well as ‘up’ (1962) towards differently situated bodies. Far from extraneous, actors in less prominent positions in the Commons are crucial to the study of gender regimes in workplace settings. Inter-professional relations and the gendered terms of arrangements between political actors matter for drawing analytical conclusions about the gendered—or rather, the *gendering* nature of arrangements within the UK House of Commons. There is a risk that staff in political settings become ‘para-everythings’ who are ‘reiteratively and citationally outside the main events of a singular [in this case Westminster] story’ (Sylvester 1998, p. 39). This reflection is particularly resonant for inter-professional and hierarchical environments like parliaments—the integrity

of elected members' identities is based on non-elected 'outsiders'—and therefore this book insists on the importance of multiple actors in order to understand gendering in a thicker sense.

The gender lens taken in this book is necessary if we attend to broader arguments about cultural backlashes in the UK, where some gender equality norms are contested (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The UK's gender regime contains several inequalities and contestations. For example, community organisations lobbied the local police force to make misogyny a hate crime in Nottinghamshire in 2016, with due consideration of the performative character of hate speech directed at women. Furthermore, with regard to arguments to apply a gender lens to the crisis in democracy (Waylen 2015), the book is also needed because in the context of increasing arguments towards more deliberative democratic mechanisms such as discussions of citizens assemblies in an All Party Parliamentary Group on deliberative democracy, established in 2019 in the UK Parliament it is important to remember that identity matters and that gendered actors do not participate in these mechanisms on an equal basis. This has coincided with a broader practitioner movement worldwide to make parliaments more gender-sensitive (Palmieri 2011). Therefore, this book is important to practitioners too, by providing a thick analysis of gender dynamics within the parliamentary arena.

The three research questions that this book seeks to provide insights on are:

1. How is gender reproduced in the 'working worlds' of the UK House of Commons and what 'work' does gender do in the workplace?  
*How does parliamentary ethnography help us to understand these processes?*
2. How do gendered actors respond to the institutional conditions and what are the possibilities for change for differently situated parliamentary actors?
3. How can we theorise institutions from a feminist discursive institutionalist framework?

In order to provide insights into these questions, the book establishes relationships between the different actors who work on the parliamentary estate and sees how they conceptualise the terms of arrangements between them in an *emic* sense, and how this might be gendering.

Sharing a concern of the weightlessness of some critical discursive social science when analysing the political (McNay 2014), the book undertakes a ‘fleshier’ investigation of power operating at the capillaries. To this end, the book borrows from *etic* frameworks and places Judith Butler’s gender performativity (2011) within a contextual framework of institutional repetition. Smith and Lee problematise the underuse of Butler’s work in political science, arguing that:

such *everyday issues around common human experience* are considered by other social scientists to be central to the practice and theory of social relations...[yet]...these commonplace issues are being written out of (or, more accurately, have never been written in to) contemporary political science. (2015, p. 49, *emphasis added*)

In this fleshed out feminist discursive institutionalist framework, power is seen as embodied. As such, gender injustices are sometimes difficult to articulate, but it is where relationships of power are cited and naturalised over and over again.

## 1.2 WHY THE UK HOUSE OF COMMONS?

Why should the institution of the UK House of Commons generate interest from feminists as an institutional arena that is worth studying? I suggest that we need to make this exploration for two sets of reasons, grouped broadly as discursive and material. In terms of the discursive place of parliament, the UK House of Commons makes claims for the UK democracy—being the central institution in the UK’s democratic regime. The UK House of Commons plays a key role in articulating public opinion to government and legitimises UK state power and authority (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2021).

This book understands parliaments as potentially crucial sites for the discursive politicisation of gender—that is, the political contestation and attention given to an issue. The UK House of Commons is a key site where gender struggles are being played out, it is the focal point for campaigners who are still willing, albeit sometimes reluctantly, to participate in the structures and practices of parliament. Parliaments contribute to discursively shaping gender values—not only in deliberative set pieces such as International Women’s Day debates; oral and written questions to the Equalities Minister and in the deliberations of the Women and

Equalities Select Committee; but also informally in discursive struggles within the parliament over institutional leadership, staffing arrangements, workplace cultures, sexual harassment, and representation.

Whilst women have ascended to some parliamentary leadership positions, there have been questions asked about how far the UK House of Commons really supports a thriving and gender-equal parliamentary democracy. At the time of the fieldwork, at the end of the 2010–2015 parliament, the Commons was numerically male dominated with just 22% of MPs being women and that figure in 2019 stands at 30%. Despite modest and incremental institutional reform to institutionalise democratic practices, there remains a growing evidence base of potentially problematic gender regimes at play within the UK House of Commons (Childs 2016)—that is, ‘the state of play in gender relations in a given institution’ (Connell 1987, p. 120) for situated parliamentary actors. There has been widely reported ritualised bullying of men and women at Prime Minister’s Questions including subtle sexualised humiliating comments; bellicose and spectacular styles of leadership from Prime Ministers—who have told MPs to ‘*Calm Down Dear*’ and called the Leader of the Opposition a ‘*Big Girl’s Blouse*’. Overbearing behaviour towards female members of the House Service (the permanent staff of the Commons) has also been reported. Three reports, the Cox Report, the White report and the Ellenbogen report, all undertaken by independent QCs highlighted considerable problems in the parliamentary workplace cultures. The gender regimes of the House of Commons are embedded within wider inequality regimes—such as aural othering towards (female) MPs with regional accents and racism experienced by black MPs and those in work experience placements (Cocozza, *Guardian*, 8 October 2019).

On the material side, parliaments are embedded in the broader economy (Rai and Spary 2019). Parliaments have claims of being sovereign and so they matter, they are not a residual actors. Contra to the parliamentary decline thesis, whilst not initiating most legislation, there are many types of power in parliaments relative to other institutions such as political parties and government (Russell and Gover 2017). The UK House of Commons is still an important institutional arena for feminists, because the working worlds and cultures of public and private institutions may themselves be subjected to parliamentary scrutiny. In their capacity as Members of Parliament, politicians are resourced to respond to case work—from those who wish to seek representation as users and workers of bureaucratic structures. However, this representation and the

effectiveness of the legislative and scrutiny process is incumbent upon—and is nested within, a broader workplace environment. In sum then, parliaments do matter for feminists on matters of gender, power and resistance—both discursively and materially.

### 1.3 GENDER AND LEGISLATIVE STUDIES

Gender and politics debates have become increasingly sophisticated in applying and developing feminist new institutionalism. The feminist institutionalist literature provides a good starting point to further increase our understanding of gendered rules and norms. Feminist institutionalism engages with new institutionalism approaches which suggest that institutions matter and that we can study institutions *qua institutions* (Waylen 2015, p. 507). Lovenduski suggests: ‘the foundations of feminist institutionalist analysis are fine-grained descriptions of gendered environments accompanied by explanations of how gender constrains or enhances agency and affects stability and change’ (2012, xi). Feminist institutionalists analyse both ‘the gendered character and the gendering effects of political institutions’ (Mackay 2011, p. 181) in both domestic and global governance.

Casting our institutional net wider, we can locate valuable research on in/equalities and institutions in literature that is not explicitly aligned with feminist institutionalism (Ahmed 2012; Phipps 2014), yet is also necessary and important. Ahmed for example grounds her institutional analysis in a phenomenological approach that centres embodiment; whilst Phipps has located the gendering of bodies in institutional discourses. However, at present the feminist institutional literature has explored identity in descriptive marks and gesture, less. Everyday embodiment and how the body comes into being in institutional contexts is important in order to understand power and how agency is more graspable for some, than others. Power then works through identities at an everyday level at the capillaries of institutional environments, which institutional perspectives have been slower at analysing (Kantola 2006).

Where this book innovates is that it provides a thicker and relational discussion of identity. Professional identity-building practices are seemingly disinterested, but we know from broader literature that institutions are places where identity and reputation ‘matters’ for the power,

(perceived) influence, and acceptance that actors may enjoy in the legislature (Smooth 2001; Puwar 2004; Brown 2014). This is consequential—not least in the everyday enactment of representation. In deepening the understanding of the gender regime through professional identity and gender building practices, we can better explore the institutional contexts of agency and can investigate more fully gender in struggle. Kenny suggests that ‘an understanding of gender as ‘practice’ or ‘performance’ shifts the analytical focus *away from the individual to social and political institutions*, processes and practices’ (2007, p. 93 *emphasis added*) but we invariably fail to attend to agency in the repetition of these acts, if our analysis is weighted too far to rules.

#### 1.4 TAKING AN EVERYDAY LENS: WHAT MIGHT AN OPTICS OF PARLIAMENTS AS WORKPLACES LOOK LIKE?

The everyday is at the heart of this book, both in its theoretical and methodological approach. It reads Butler as a theorist of the everyday and joins scholars who read gender performativity as/with institutions (Tyler 2019), and as such, ties feminist political theory to legislative studies (see also Rai 2011). The everyday appears to be a propitious concept in the current disaffected political climate, when we unpack it. This is because, as feminists note, it is a concept that conjures relationality (Colebrook 2002). This focus may have come about in order to bridge the perceived distance between elite workplace norms and professional workplace norms (Busby 2013). Unlike anthropology and cultural studies, where the everyday is taken as given as a substantive area of inquiry, there has only recently been an everyday interdisciplinary turn in neighbouring disciplines to political science, such as economics (Hozic and True 2016). International Relations scholar, Enloe puts it simply, ‘[the] mundane matters’ (2011). Political science has been slower to take these conceptual steps and to follow through with an analytics of power that moves from government to governance. Shifting one’s optics to beneath ceremonial displays of power in everyday workplace practices is not turning a blind eye to more ceremonial relations of power that have been explored, such as in Prime Ministers Questions, or the State Opening of Parliament but is complimentary to these approaches.

The everyday is arguably not an ontological concept but more of an epistemological concept. If we recognise this, we can see that placing the everyday—or rather plural everyday in focus can then spawn a range

of analytical trajectories using interdisciplinary analytical frameworks that draw upon ‘distinct lineages of thought to bear upon a wide-ranging set of practices’ (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, p. 279). I will now outline how one everyday lens might be a workplace approach, though this is only one way to take forward an everyday analysis.

Feminist political scientists have begun to consider parliaments as gendered organisations, acknowledging both the theoretical and empirical interactions between the parliamentary organisational context and the political and legislative context (Dahlerup 1988; Crawford and Pini 2010; Connolly 2013; Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2014; Wangnerud 2015). Some feminist political scientists have developed this categorisation further to explore parliaments and local and devolved government as gendered workplaces (Charles 2014, p. 369; Childs 2016; Erikson and Josefsson 2018, 2020; Erikson and Verge 2020); arguing that the working conditions of parliamentarians and staff feeds into democratic questions about parliaments (Erikson and Verge 2020, p. 2). Politicians have also made use of labouring discourses and increasingly make sense of parliaments as workplaces, in addition to their representation function. They suggest that parliaments should symbolically and practically lead on workplace standards.

A gendered workplace perspective generates methodological issues. These include issues of coverage in terms of actors and how far a comparative framework can be generalised to other parliaments (Erikson and Josefsson 2020). In terms of methods, a survey data set (Erikson and Josefsson 2018), whilst producing robust data and vast coverage, has epistemological problems, since involves the atomism of positivist approaches and cannot capture ambivalences. Qualitative interviews are beneficial to capture some attitudinal aspects of gender equality (Childs 2004) but cannot capture how this self-representation interacts with everyday, contextualised behaviour. Immersion within the setting (Childs 2016) avoids the atomism of surveys and the positive presentation of self in interviews and has the potential to enrich our understanding of gender bias. Linked to a workplace perspective is the notion of power operating informally that constructs everyday gendered hierarchies within parliaments. Ethnography has the potential to canvass a wide range of power relations within the parliamentary workplace and the gendered terms of arrangements between and within actors working in different working worlds. Ethnography is fruitful for highlighting political practices and ongoing

contestations within parliaments—that is to observe gender in struggle, as well as gender repeated over time.

To position this book beneath representation literatures, the everyday would suggest indeterminacy that cannot be fixed by rules and arguably is in excess and ‘outside’ representation, or more akin to symbolic-discursive forms of representation (Lombardo and Meier 2014; Galligan and Meier 2016). This book does not abdicate from the possibility that gendering can be an effect of positioning within rules, since it is the contention of this book that gendered rules structure the everyday—and indeed are constitutive of the ‘micro’-foundations of institutions (Lowndes 2019), but are not fully determining of the power relations of the UK House of Commons. The book seeks to take a more discursive approach in order to centre how discursive interactions with these rules are subject-contingent. Institutions produce and interact with subject positions—that is representational formations of gender. However, deeper processes of parliamentary actors’ self-representation, disidentification and how they are positioned within these structures and subject positions are important.

## 1.5 BOOK OVERVIEW

Moving on from this introduction, Chapters 2 and 3 provide consideration of the conceptual and methodological frameworks used in the text. Chapter 2 provides a framework to investigate what it means to say that gender is reproduced everyday in the UK House of Commons. It argues that the discursive dynamics in parliaments are important. It draws upon and develops the feminist new institutional approach from a discursive perspective. This provides conceptual flesh on the gendered practices in the UK House of Commons. In ‘fleshing out’ a feminist discursive institutionalist approach, the reader will be introduced to some of the key ideas of Judith Butler. The framework is developed to investigate the ways that ‘male’ and ‘female’ political subjects in parliament are positioned in working rules and practices. The book is therefore valuable in looking beneath more ceremonial performances of power within this setting to explore gender in institutional struggle.

Chapter 3 provides a stand-alone methodological chapter discussing parliamentary ethnography from a feminist discursive institutionalist lens and brings Judith Butler into a productive tension with ethnography. There are several possible methodological inroads into exploring the reproduction of gender in the UK House of Commons. The chapter is based on the premise that feminist researchers can attempt to make



a fuller understanding of (in)formal dynamics, through immersion within the setting. The chapter presents ethnography, discusses access and participation and maps the ‘field’ in terms of the three sets of actors that are engaged with. The methodological chapter is combined with a methodological appendix which grounds the discussion in interpretivist political science.

The empirical chapters open in Chapter 4 by firstly outlining the three ‘discursive institutions’—that is, three institutionalised ideas which frame, produce and discipline gender performances and take on an empirical specificity in the UK House of Commons. The three different, but overlapping ideas that I encountered in the UK House of Commons are: (1) the career cycle—that is, the everyday transactions, enactment and movement throughout a career and the acquisition and recognition of status and skills; (2) citizenship—that is, the inward-looking, world-making relationships performed on the parliamentary estate; and (3) public service that refers to other-regarding, duty-bound activity and has conceptual links to motivation, accountability (regimes) and ethics. The chapter locates the inter-subjectivity of these ideas in the field, and claims that they were palpable and performative enough to be conceptualised as discursive institutions.

Chapter 5 looks at the first set of actors: MPs. Whilst democratic practices introduced in the 2010 parliament ‘have much to say that is pertinent to issues of women in politics’ (All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Parliament 2014, p. 14), the endogenisation of some of the democratic innovations into day-to-day gender regimes in the House of Commons has not been explored in depth. The chapter looks at the endogenisation of democratic changes surrounding committee chair elections into MPs’ working days, such as leadership elections to select committee chairs and the performance of leadership. In terms of citizenship, journalists on the estate are key interlocutors in framing the relationships, activity and mood of the estate and so relationships with journalists are important. Gender is ‘in struggle’ for MPs and women MPs find themselves being heard as ‘insistent’ when having to demand the same media coverage as men. In terms of public service, in the absence of a job description, I explore some of the claims making around ‘good’ representation and how gender is performed in these claims.

Chapter 6 looks at a period of open institutional struggle around changes to a rule-in-form: parliamentary (re)design of the staffing leadership structure and the overall governance structure of the UK House of

Commons. The chapter examines subtle resistances to the appointment of an Australian, ‘outsider’ candidate, Carol Mills and argues that in this episode, the career structure was de-gendered—that is, gender was not treated as an overall analytical category in the governance structure of the House, whilst the applicant was quite overtly gendered in discourses by situated parliamentary actors. The chapter charts the movement towards ‘gender citizenship’ and broader equalities performed through Workplace Equality Networks as parliamentary staff use their skills to organise for change in the House of Commons. Finally, the chapter discusses existing efforts to link up parliament with wider society and how rule displacement around bullying followed Dame Laura Cox’s report, where an inadequate behavioural policy had fallen into disuse.

Chapter 7 explores the working world of UK parliamentary researchers, responding to a double absence of research on/with this set of actors, and offering perhaps the first academic treatment of parliamentary researchers through a gender lens. The chapter looks at the ‘work’ that gender does in their workplace performances. Quite uniquely as actors on the estate, parliamentary researchers are structurally in a relationship of status contingency to their MP. This means that their reputation is based upon who their boss is and this power relationship is constitutive of gender performances and is affectively managed. In terms of citizenship, parliamentary researchers are present on the estate for longer, although in volatile working contracts, experiencing high turnover, and therefore inter-office relationships may be performative in terms of job opportunities. Finally, in terms of public service, the chapter argues that researchers can be constrained when performing public service. It explores how the claims of sexual harassment were made intelligible for this group of actors in the debate that followed the field-work and draws attention to an intra-party rule in use—the notion that researchers will campaign in the constituency, the lack of parliamentary coverage for this activity, and the gendering therein.

Chapter 8 pulls together the different themes of the book and considers how looking beneath the spectacle to the kinds of dynamics that mainstream legislative studies can neglect, may be insightful of parliaments’ inner workings. These dynamics include the gendered rules at play in the UK House of Commons, how actors respond, and the ‘work’ that gender does in these terms of arrangements. Rather than complete domination the book finds that gender is ‘in struggle’, with different varieties of hierarchies reproduced everyday. Actors do not respond uniformly

and the book discusses four responses to refuture parliamentary democracy. Finally, it discusses how change might come about, especially given the challenges and reflections that Covid-19 poses to parliaments and what that change might look like. Taking a feminist discursive approach to endogenous change, it argues that change is likely to be subject-contingent and so is resistance to change. It draws on Butler's notion of discursive responsibility within and around institutional settings. Overall this book forms one small part of a broader feminist project to refuture UK and international parliamentary democracy.

## NOTE

1. Field note, 10th April 2014, London.

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